

Topsy-Turvy

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Topsy-Turvy

by [dracoqueen22](#)

Summary

If asked, Liege Megatron of the Kaon Aerie would say his life was perfect. With a content, growing flock to manage, he had nothing to worry about. Loneliness was part of a Liege's life, he'd decided. Until the bright-spirited Hot Rod comes along, determined to be the exception to the rule.

Chapter 1

It was the increasingly loud accumulation of noise and shouting and clicking that roused Megatron from his scrolls and away from his desk. He stood, rolling his shoulders and fluffing his feather-mane as the noise not only grew louder, but also closer.

He frowned, flipped a sheet over the stacks of private documents and stepped out of his office, ducking under the low-hanging tapestry that served as his door. Here in Kaon, the temperatures remained steady and balmy, except for a single month in the worst of winter. They didn't need anything heavier.

A crowd had gathered outside his door, an easy feat considering he kept his office on the lowest level. Megatron's frown deepened as said gathering had formed a circle with some unfortunate harpy in the middle. He could see nothing yet but flashes of crimson feathers. He was a smol. A single smol and not one Megatron recognized as belonging to his flock.

Megatron rose to his full height. He was not the largest of his flock, that honor was reserved for Maximus and Roadbuster, but his authority carried a weight of its own. Those closest to him immediately lapsed into silence, and recognition spread quickly.

"What is going on here?" Megatron demanded as he cut through the crowd. They parted to make way for him, as they were expected to do.

"There is a newcomer, my liege."

The answer came from his right, the voice belonging to his most-trusted Speaker. Megatron turned as the dark blue harpy slinked up to him, one of his younger siblings clinging to the thick floof at his midsection. Soundwave was never seen without at least one.

Laserbeak, like her twin Buzzsaw, was usually content to perch upon Soundwave's shoulders, nearly lost to the ring of feathers, but Frenzy and Rumble clung to his midsection while Ravage enjoyed taking position upon Soundwave's tail. Ravage did have impeccable balance.

Today, it was Frenzy who had a tight grip on Soundwave's belly.

"From where?" Megatron demanded as together, they moved through the rest of the crowd to the center and the half-kneeling, half-collapsed smol being guarded by one of Megatron's best warriors and also his fencemaster. Drift might have been a smol himself, but he was one of the fiercest fighters Megatron had ever met.

"The Vosian flock," Soundwave replied as Frenzy made some kind of chattering noise, his eyes narrowed at the newly arrived smol.

Megatron made a noncommittal noise and looked down at the crimson harpy. He was of a size with Drift, but only just. His flame-colored feathers certainly marked him as other. Megatron had few harpies in his flock who sported such brilliant shades, even among his smols. There were wounds as well. Blood speckled his feathers and some had been torn away. The blood was old, rust-colored and flaking away, barely visible against the crimson of his feathers.

"Have you seen battle?" Megatron asked, careful to keep his tone gentle. He suspected this was

another refugee smol, one who had fought for his freedom from a restrictive society.

The smol kept his head bowed, his feathers slicked. He had been taught manners, proper to some cities, offensive to others. Clearly, this one was from a society of the former, places where smols were meant to be seen and not heard.

“No, Liege Megatron,” he replied, his voice a grating rasp that made Megatron grimace after listening to Soundwave's more dulcet tones. “But I have been on my own for some time and the world is not welcoming to a flockless harpy.” A small sound rose in his throat, one of loneliness and loss.

Megatron's core ached to hear it. His instincts fluffed up his feathering. He sank to one knee, all the better to see the smol, and all the better to soothe his instincts, which demanded he comfort the poor harpy. Some of the nearest baras around him, especially those unmated, responded as well. Many with interest.

It had been some time since they welcomed a refugee. Recurve had been the last, and a bara much to the disappointment of many of the unmated.

Megatron offered a hand to the poor smol, talons curled inward, a show of trust. “Why are you alone, little smol? Where is your flock?”

There was silence. The smol shivered, his feathers rustling. He did not look up, the feathers upon his crown drooping. Yes, an abused one indeed. Megatron had welcomed many such harpies to his flock.

“My liege--”

Megatron lifted a wing, silencing Soundwave before he could speak again. He wanted to hear the answer from the smol. He would rely on Soundwave's information later. He wanted to hear what truth the crimson one would offer him.

“I am willing to offer you a home, little one,” Megatron continued, hand waiting patiently. “We are a flock of misfits, after all. And as far as I know, I am the only flock willing to accept outsiders. But I must know what has caused you to be outcast. I must know if I am welcoming danger to my flock.”

The smol's clawed hands rested on the woven branches of the aerie floor. His fingers drew tight, talons scraping lines into the wood.

“I am no danger, my liege,” he rasped and finally lifted his head, his eyes as red as his feathers. Truly, a unique harpy. “And my only crime is one of curiosity.”

“Curiosity.” Megatron tilted his head. He could think of only one curiosity that would be frowned upon by the more traditional flocks. “You are interested in humans.”

The smol ducked his head, but his gaze did not leave Megatron's. “They are fascinating. They are not as cruel as the stories would have us believe. Their ways are different, but not wrong. I only wanted to study, to learn...” he paused, tongue flicking over his bottom lip. A crust of blood had formed at the corner of his mouth. “But it's not proper, for a smol, to be so curious.”

Not in Vos. Megatron had been there once upon a time. Vos had strict conventions regarding the behavior of their flock. Smols and baras were expected to obey these rules, and they were not

allowed to stray. Misbehavior was said to invite chaos into their nests, into their flock, and into their aerie.

Leadership claimed that the commandments were crafted for the good of the flock. In reality, they were for the good of the few, and they made Vos a rigid, unwelcoming place.

This smol would not be the first harpy Megatron had welcomed from Vos.

“Things are different here,” Megatron said with a wry tone. “If you want to study the humans, that is your right, only know that you may still be viewed as an oddity.”

“I can handle being considered unusual,” the smol replied, with something like relief shuddering through his body. His feathers eased, loosening from their tight clamp. “What I cannot live with is being stifled and shoved into a cage that does not fit.”

Megatron pushed his offered hand a little closer. “Then you are welcome here, little smol, provided my Speaker's research does not prove you to be a danger. What are you called?”

The smol's eyes flicked from Megatron's face to his offered hand and back again. “Your Speaker will find nothing.” He lifted a hand, turning his palm upward and laying the back of it against Megatron's curled fingers. “I am Starscream.”

“Very well, Starscream.” Megatron rose to his full height, drawing up Starscream as well, who was tall for a smol, but very lithe. “Welcome to Kaon.”

His flock cheered, a welcome change from the hiss and clicking of uncertainty and agitation. Megatron's flock was not unused to newcomers as he hadn't lied. They were a flock of misfits, gathered from flocks all across Cybertron. But they'd had their share of monsters, and they were right to be cautious.

Starscream ducked his head, his crown feathers lifting as some of his confidence returned. “I am grateful for your hospitality, my liege.”

“Here in Kaon, we welcome all who are willing to put in the effort to improve the flock,” Megatron said as he returned the dip with a lift of his chin. He dropped his hand so that Starscream might reclaim his own. “You are unmated?”

“I am,” Starscream answered and his tail feathers spread as he was quick to add, “And I am not seeking.”

Megatron lifted a hand, forestalling the fear he could see gathering in the smol's eyes. “It is not a requirement. I merely asked to know if we should keep our eyes on the horizon for someone to follow after you.”

Starscream shook his head, a wealth of sadness darkening his eyes. “There is no one.”

What a lonely life he must have led, Megatron realized and sympathized. Harpies were not made to be alone. Even the unmated sought comfort and connection with family members and other unmated. As a newcomer, Starscream would have no friends or family to share a nest.

“I am sorry to hear that.” Megatron rose to his full height and looked at the gathered crowd.

Much of it had dispersed once his flock had seen their Liege attending to the matter. Many lingered, most of them in Megatron's inner circle. Soundwave, of course, but also Shockwave and Sunstorm, one of whom was mated and always willing to take in new additions to the flock.

Shockwave's mate, another bara named Orion, would likely insist upon it. Not for himself, but because Orion had a core of spun platinum. He refused to see any smol sleep alone if he could help it. He was a nurturer at core, like Soundwave, a smol's core in a bara's body.

Megatron's flock continued to be that of misfits. But he found he preferred it that way.

He gestured Shockwave and Sunstorm closer. The scarred bara was the first to approach, the largest of those present save for Megatron himself. He dipped his head in a bow to Starscream. Sunstorm, meanwhile, smiled, his muted gold shades and slighter frame marking him as a smol, like Starscream. Perhaps even from the same flock.

Both carried the telltale recoil of a smol raised in Vos.

"You are without a family unit," Megatron continued as he spoke to Starscream. "Both Shockwave and Sunstorm are open to supporting unmated smols. As Liege, my nest is also open to you." Privately, he hoped Starscream would decline.

Megatron was willing to support any smol in his nest with no questions asked. But he still preferred his privacy. He was as much a nontraditional Liege as the rest of his flock were nontraditional harpies. Once upon a time, his nest might have been shared by another, but Megatron had let him slip through his talons. In the end, that might have been better. Megatron had no business being another's mate.

Not that he would ever tell anyone why. Soundwave knew as a matter of necessity, but it was no one else's concern. Megatron was a fitting Liege for his size, skill, and intelligence. There need be no other qualification.

Starscream offered both a tentative smile, though his body language suggested he was uncomfortable. "I am not used to sharing nests..." he began as though carefully choosing his words.

"If you prefer solitude, that is fine as well," Sunstorm said with a cheerful chirp and twitch of his long tail. "But at least allow me to show you around and get you settled." He winked as he bounced toward Starscream and linked their elbows. "Though don't be surprised if Orion tracks you down later to ensure you are comfortable."

Starscream's smile grew a little more strained. "I see. I thank you for your hospitality."

"Oh, it's no trouble," Sunstorm all but sang with a ruffle of his feathers. "Come on, Shockwave. Let's show our new addition around."

Shockwave heaved a heavy breath and cast Megatron an amused look. "I trust you have no need of me, my liege?"

"None." Megatron dismissed him with a flick of his hand, half-turning back toward his workroom. "Unless, of course, you wish to fill this paperwork for me."

Shockwave laughed and fell into step after Starscream and Sunstorm, the latter of whom was already chattering away. If he noticed that Starscream looked as though he wanted to escape, Sunstorm gave

no sign of it.

Megatron had the feeling they would be the best of friends by the end of it. Or the worst of enemies. One could never tell with Sunstorm.

“As for the rest of you,” Megatron said, addressing the dozen or so harpies who lingered, some of the baras looking after Starscream with approving speculation, “back to your duties and your families. The show's over.”

“I dunno, my Liege,” one of his warriors commented with a waggle of his eyebrows and a smirk. “Looks to me like the show's just beginning. He's a fiery one.”

Megatron gave Lockdown an unimpressed look. “We'll see. For now, talons off. He's not looking.”

“And what a shame that is.” Lockdown winked and turned away with a flicker of his dark feathers, a black so dark they carried an olive sheen.

He would bear watching. Not that Megatron hadn't noticed it before. Lockdown set off warning bells to Megatron's instincts, though Soundwave's careful research had discovered nothing dangerous in the bara's past. Still, best to be watchful.

“Soundwave.”

His Speaker stepped up beside him, absently petting Frenzy as he cheeped at him for attention. Frenzy could speak just fine, but he and his brothers seemed to have developed some kind of private language among them, one Megatron was not privy to.

“I want a full report on Starscream,” Megatron murmured, careful to keep his tone low so his lingering flock could not overhear. “And find me someone to watch Lockdown. His recent behavior is troublesome.”

Lockdown's comment had not been the first he'd made. He had a... history of offering unwanted attention to the unmated in Kaon – bara and smol alike, though he favored the smaller baras and the prettier smols.

Kaon's flock accepted all outliers and oddities. But Megatron did not tolerate criminals or those exhibiting disrespectful behavior. Lockdown seemed perfectly content to be heading toward both.

Soundwave dipped his head, his eyeshield catching a glint from the sun. His sensitive vision demanded the device, created by one of Megatron's top scientists, a large bara named Perceptor.

“It will be done, my Liege.”

“Good.” Megatron smiled and patted Soundwave on the shoulder opposite of where Frenzy had clambered up to perch. “Find me when you have something to report.”

Soundwave departed, and Megatron returned to his work room and the stack of paperwork waiting for him. He slid onto his stool, flicking his dark gray tail out of the way, but before he could return to the supply report, he pulled out his ledger. Megatron was always careful to keep track of every member of his flock.

Not all who came to Kaon chose to stay, but Megatron still liked to keep record. Especially since

there were rumors of harpies disappearing from other flocks, almost as though they had been taken. Whether Starscream chose to stay or not, Megatron wanted to have record of his arrival.

He pulled the heavy tome off the woven shelf to his left and slid it atop his paperwork stack. It was half-full at this point, each page filled with neat, dark lines, some more extensive than others.

The large book, with its thick paper and durable binding, had been a gift from the dean of Kaon University once the agreement had been made for Megatron's newly forming flock to settle here. It had come with an entire box of fountain pens, available in four different colors. While Megatron found them a little tricky to hold, they required far less effort than a quill.

He opened to the most recent entries and started to fill in Starscream's information, though some he would have to leave blank until Soundwave reported back. Place of origin and class were easy enough, but as for mated status, family to contact, and other interests... all of that would come with research.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and Megatron froze. There was a flash of something crimson and orange, and he had a moment to be alarmed, before his brain put two and two together. Alarm shifted to irritation.

"How long have you been here?" Megatron asked as he put down his quill and rubbed his face, pinching the bridge of his nose above the hard ridge of visible bone.

"Awww." Behind him, Hot Rod swished fully into view, a large grin on his face, and lucent feathers fluttering where they framed his cheeks. "How did you see me?"

"The fact that you are brightly colored might have something to do with it," Megatron replied with a soft sigh. He turned to face the flame-colored smol, though he remained seated on his stool. This way, they were almost of a height, and he didn't have to loom over the smaller harpy.

"Can I help you?"

Hot Rod grinned, locking his talons behind his back as he stepped closer, his collar feathers swaying with the motion. "You could start by looking happier to see me."

Megatron rolled his eyes and turned back around. "You are persistent, I'll give you that much." He picked up his quill and continued inking Starscream's information. Perhaps if he ignored Hot Rod long enough, the vain smol would give up and go bother someone else.

That tactic hadn't worked yet, but there was always the chance it might.

Except not this time because Megatron felt Hot Rod's long, elegant talons rest on his shoulders, a light touch that sent a shiver down Megatron's spine. The heat of the smol was tangible, as was the scent of him, ever so enticing to Megatron's instincts. Hot Rod's body heat always seemed to be several degrees higher than the other smols, as though the color of his feathers reflected the fire burning within.

His feathers brushed against Megatron's own as Hot Rod leaned closer, his voice turning into a soft, rolling purr. "I know what I want," Hot Rod murmured. "Perhaps you are not used to that. Your nest is empty, my liege. It's not right for a leader to be alone. Things must come in balance."

The last sounded like something Hot Rod had plucked out of a textbook. It certainly wasn't like the

smol's usual manner of speaking.

"Be that as it may, it is empty by choice, Hot Rod." Megatron ruffled his feathers and shrugged his shoulders free of Hot Rod's gentle hold, despite how much he craved to turn and take the eager smol.

Hot Rod refused to be dissuaded.

He did pout so very enticingly. Megatron caught sight of Hot Rod's face in the reflection on his metal-plated ink pot. His blue eyes were shimmering with happiness, though his plump lips pulled downward with disappointment.

Megatron banished thoughts of kissing away Hot Rod's pout. Of drawing that lower lip between his teeth and applying the gentlest of pressures, just to hear the pretty smol moan and see him arch his back.

"There are at least a dozen unmated baras in my flock, or another smol if you are so inclined," Megatron continued, making it a point not to turn and look at Hot Rod. Too much temptation lingered in a mere glance. "You are welcome to display for any of them."

Megatron even promised he wouldn't be jealous of whosoever else Hot Rod chose.

Much.

Hot Rod swished to Megatron's right side and braced his weight upon the desk, planting his right hand in the middle of Megatron's book as he leaned in closer. "I don't want them. I want *you*." It was all but a purr, a rolling warmth that drizzled down Megatron's spine and set his senses ablaze.

Megatron turned his head to look up at the smol, who was nibbling on his bottom lip. There was a tremble to his body that suggested he was fighting against his instincts. Hot Rod was one of the most natural smols Megatron had ever met, yet in the past two years of his residence here, he still refused to take a mate. Surely, it pained him.

Still, he claimed he would have Megatron or none at all. He hopped nests as well, often sleeping with Shockwave and Orion or Perceptor and Drift, but never staying in one nest for too long. Megatron had, on numerous occasions, caught him feigning illness to stay in Ratchet's medical center.

The one place he had not asked for a berth was Megatron's nest, despite that being his right as an unmated to ask of his Liege. There were some lines even someone as impetuous as Hot Rod would not cross apparently. He could have his own nest, if he so desired, but Hot Rod had not requested one. He seemed to prefer to drift from nest to nest as if none other would suit permanently but that of his mate's.

It was behavior Megatron had seen before, usually in smols whose instincts were so attuned to their class they couldn't fathom owning something that didn't also belong to their mate.

Megatron sighed and turned toward Hot Rod again, a motion which put their bodies in closer proximity. His nostrils flared as the smol's unique scent flooded his senses, and Megatron's body rumbled, dangerously close to a mating purr. Sweet and sultry, raspberries and sweet cream, the spicier tang of almonds underlying it all.

Damn it.

"I intend to remain unmated, Hot Rod," Megatron said, quite sure he'd explained this before and hoping that perhaps this time, he would get through to Hot Rod. "I have no interest in mates or... or fledglings." The last hurt to say because it was largely untrue, but he could not admit such to Hot Rod.

It was a lie, but it was also truth. Megatron had no interest in fledglings because they were not in his future. He would have to content himself with protecting the fledglings of his flock alone.

"Aside from that, the life of a liege leaves little room for the satisfaction of a mate, much less a smol such as yourself who commands attention." He curled his forefinger under Hot Rod's chin, an act of affection between a liege and his flockmember. "I would ask that you seek the interest of another for your own sake."

Hot Rod's breathing audibly quickened. He tilted his head down toward Megatron's finger even as his feathers rustled. His eyes, bright and blue, grew larger, pupils dilating.

"You say you have no interest in anyone else, but I saw the way you looked at that Vosian," he murmured, envy so heavy in his tone that Megatron could almost taste it.

Megatron blinked. He had few Vosians in his flock, it was a long and difficult journey between there and Kaon, one few survived. Of those Vosian refugees, Megatron had spared none so much as a second glance. Did Hot Rod mean the new arrival?

"Starscream?"

"Yes. Him." Hot Rod frowned, but didn't withdraw. If anything, he leaned into Megatron's touch, as though he craved it. His instincts begged for the strong hand of a mate. He was only hurting himself with his stubbornness that said hand be Megatron's.

Megatron tried not to laugh, but all he managed to do was reduce it to a light chuckle. "If you saw anything in my look, it was suspicion. It is difficult to leave the Vosian flock. I am impressed Starscream survived it. There was no further interest, other than that of a liege for his flock members."

"It was more than that," Hot Rod insisted.

Megatron sighed and dropped his hand, ignoring the disappointed shade to Hot Rod's eyes. "Jealousy is unbecoming on you, Hot Rod. Especially when there is nothing to cause your envy. Now do you not have responsibilities in my flock or shall I get Soundwave to assign you some?"

It was chastisement and reminder. He was Liege and Hot Rod was overstepping. A certain degree of spirit in a member of his flock and a pretty smol was acceptable. But Hot Rod's insistence bordered on disrespectful at times and dangerously close to a vie for leadership.

Hot Rod stepped back, removing his talons from Megatron's desk. His disappointment was palpable as his plumage settled, and his feathers slicked down against his body, making himself appear smaller. Megatron's insides quivered, longing to comfort the saddened smol. But Hot Rod would only take it as encouragement.

Besides, Megatron knew he would go to Orion. Of all the mated baras, Hot Rod preferred Orion for

comfort and protection. At least he had chosen well.

“I am due a shift in the cradle,” Hot Rod admitted, though it was with a wince.

Megatron frowned.

Hot Rod was ill-suited to caring for the fledglings. He was too brash, too easily excitable. He needed something a bit more stimulating. Besides, it was supposed to be mated smols who tended to the fledglings. They were the ones whose coddling instincts had activated.

“Who gave you such an assignment? I will speak with them to put you somewhere better suited,” Megatron said, thoughts shifting toward the duties of a liege, rather than the duties of an unmated bara. The distraction was very welcome.

“No, no. It's fine.” Hot Rod backed away, his tail nearly causing a small stand and vase to topple. “I'm happy to help where I'm needed. Really.”

Megatron eyebrows drew down. “If you insist. But it's no trouble. I do want you to be happy here, Hot Rod. I just want you to realize that happiness isn't going to involve a relationship with me.”

Flame-colored feathers drooped further. “Yeah.” Hot Rod's smile fell flat on the edges. “I'm coming to understand that.” He dipped his head, plumage slicked tight to his crown. “I'll see you at supper.”

He left before Megatron could find another word.

Megatron's frown deepened.

Hot Rod was an odd one. But then, there wasn't a single member of Megatron's flock who was not unusual in some way. It was a point of pride for him.

Outliers and outcasts. Those who broke the mold and those who never fit in them. They even had a treaty with the humans, a feat no other flock in all of Cybertron could boast.

Megatron's flock was small, and it would never be a powerhouse like Iacon or Vos' flocks, but he preferred it this way. His flock was loyal. His flock was determined to protect itself.

His flock was home.

~

Chapter 2

Starscream settled in as well as any others who had joined Megatron's flock. Newcomers were always anxious at first, afraid to rattle cages or break some unstated rule. Every other flock on Cybertron had their own ways, their own standards, but not Megatron's.

He only required they treat each other with respect and contribute to the flock in whatever meaningful manner they could. Anyone was allowed to mate with another, so long as it was consensual on both parts. Anyone could choose to learn a trade or skill, no matter if they were bara or smol.

Given what Soundwave had discovered of Starscream – a smol from Vos who had fled his flock because he despised his assigned partner – Megatron felt the newcomer would fit in well here. No one would force Starscream to mate, though there were already several interested baras circling Starscream's chosen nest, and Starscream would be free to pursue his scientific interests. The latter was also something Vos would not allow Starscream.

Smols were not meant to be learned. They were meant to mate, bear fledglings, and raise them. They were meant to manage nests and decorate the arms of their baras. They were meant to be quiet and soft-spoken and respectful.

Observing Starscream for a few mere hours only proved why he had not fit in among the Vos flock. Starscream was characteristically a bara, if not for his size and coloration. He was brash, dominant, and knew nothing of meekness. He was a leader, not a follower; a fighter, rather than a harpy of pacifism.

Megatron was confident Starscream would find a home here in Kaon. Even if he hadn't gotten along well with Sunstorm. Neither friendship nor hatred had spawned between them, just a respectful distance.

Oh, well. At least, Starscream had made friends with others in the flock. He was not a harpy alone, which had been Megatron's largest concern for the new arrival. Starscream was making himself at home, growing comfortable, and all was well.

Until a week after his arrival, Starscream abruptly disappeared, turning Megatron's flock upside down. Orion fretted and Sunstorm started muttering about human harpy traffickers and both refused to rest until Starscream was found.

Megatron arranged a search party. There were many volunteers, including Hot Rod. Small though the Kaon flock was, they were close knit. They looked after one another. They wouldn't be able to survive otherwise.

Of the friendships Starscream had begun to cultivate, he'd built a unique one with Perceptor and Drift. It was Perceptor who suggested Starscream might have gone to visit the humans, especially given Starscream's vocal fascination with them.

"So why don't you refrain from sweeping across the land like winged death and consider contacting Professor Shin first." Perceptor tone was perfectly even, betraying none of the anxiety the rest of the flock seemed to harbor.

Perceptor's logic proved to be the winner.

It was a sheepish Starscream who returned to the aerie, damp from a late afternoon rainstorm, and chirping apologetically at Megatron, who greeted him with folded arms and a stern expression.

"I do not object to your curiosity with the humans," Megatron said as Starscream stood in front of him, a properly contrite smol whose behavior smacked of his raising in Vos. It made Megatron ill to see it. "I only ask that you inform someone before you depart and your intended time of return. We are friendly with the university, but not all humans are as kind."

"I understand." Starscream's plumage drifted further down. "Thank you, my liege. I will accept whatever punishment you deem necessary."

Megatron shook his head. "There is no punishment, Starscream. You are new and still learning our rules. Apologize and that will be enough. Along with a promise that in the future, you will keep us informed so that this doesn't happen again." One crisis a month was all Megatron could handle.

Surprise reflected in Starscream's eyes, but he dipped his head again, another show of deference. "I promise, my liege."

Megatron lifted the corners of his lips toward a smile and patted Starscream on the shoulder. "That is good to know. Now, avail yourself of the springs and get to nest before you catch sick. I understand you haven't met our chief physician yet?"

"No, my liege."

Megatron chuckled. "Then be sure and do so tomorrow. He'll be in a much finer mood if you're not already ill when you come to him. Understand?"

Starscream nodded and eased out from under his hand, discomfort evident in the lay of his feathers. Megatron retracted his hand and made a mental note – traditional body language would not work with Starscream. Good to know.

"Yes, my liege. Have a good eve." Starscream ducked his head in a show of respect and scuttled into the aerie proper, casting one last look over his shoulder.

It would have been amusing, if Starscream's behavior wasn't indicative of abuse. Megatron had heard stories of Vos. He held two other refugees from the Vosian flock. Their strict rules suited few harpies, but even fewer chose to risk their cores and leave.

In any case, with Starscream returned safe and sound, Orion could stop fretting and Megatron could return to his nest for much needed sleep. But not before he delivered a message to Perceptor, who had insisted he be informed the moment Starscream safely returned. He and Drift had... adopted, one could say, the newly joined smol.

Megatron suspected Perceptor was relieved to have an intellectual equal within the aerie. Despite living within sight-distance of a human university and despite the eclectic nature of Megatron's flock, he had few scientists and even fewer of those interested in human studies. There was Brainstorm, of course, but he and Perceptor did not get along.

More on Perceptor's end than Brainstorm's. The latter's blatant enthusiasm for all things explosive and his lack of interest in safety measures grated on Perceptor's patience. Brainstorm was one of the

few harpies in Megatron's flock who was officially banned from having direct contact with the humans and visiting Kaon University without a chaperone. The trouble he could get into was not worth it.

Perceptor and Drift lived on one of the highest platforms in the aerie. Years before Megatron's arrival, Perceptor had been gifted a telescope by Professor Shin, and it was best placed at the highest elevation. Drift, also, had a preference for residing as far from the ground as possible.

That Brainstorm preferred to reside on the ground level might have also had something to do with their choice of nest location.

Presently, the mated pair had their door pulled open, welcoming all inside. The lightning balls that served as lanterns gave off a soft and inviting blue glow. The low murmur of conversation drifted out, reassuring Megatron that they weren't intimately occupied. Though Perceptor and Drift had often invited a voyeur or several, Megatron was not one who had taken them up on their offer.

He rapped his knuckles against the frame to announce his presence and stepped into the nest, as always, first taken by the lattice of branches which formed their ceiling. Drift had taken days to strip the leaves and weave the thin, supple twigs into a beautiful, geometric design. Little chains hung from the ceiling as well, cheap and colorful baubles dangling from the ends in random placement.

The ceiling resembled the night sky, if one knew how to look. The balcony might house their telescope, but from anywhere in the nest, they could peer upward and see an approximation of the sky.

The ceiling art had been Drift's claiming gift to Perceptor, though one had not been needed. Drift was determined to prove his devotion.

Perceptor and Drift were currently curled around each other in their nest, a construction of pillows and bamboo matting and woven willow-bark – all Drift's doing. He had the nimble fingers of an artisan, and while he was a smol, the almost dull nature of his coloring and the fact that he favored being a warrior, was what made him something of an outcast, and brought him here, to Megatron's aerie.

Drift and Perceptor were twined together, a mix of gold-white-red feathers and crimson-black. Perceptor was the first to notice Megatron, and he nudged Drift out of a doze.

"No, don't get up," Megatron said. He lifted a hand, his belly clenched with both jealousy and longing.

Like so many in his flock, Perceptor and Drift had a love story for the ages. Megatron couldn't deny he was envious of their connection. His nest would be forever empty and seeing happily mated pairs was a constant reminder of that.

Jealousy, however, did not become a Liege. So he swallowed it down.

"Starscream safely returned of his own accord," Megatron informed them as Drift settled back into Perceptor's arms, purring a quiet song as Perceptor stroked his back. "Given the weather, I sent him to the springs, but perhaps he might benefit from some assistance."

Drift chuckled, though he neither had his eyes open nor was he looking at Megatron. "Are you ordering us to groom him, sir?"

“Merely making a gentle suggestion. A nudge if you will.” Megatron let the corners of his mouth curve toward a smile. “It is evident to me Starscream could use as many friends as are willing to accept the role. And it seems to me that he is too used to berthing alone.”

Perceptor laughed. “I can think of one other who has the same problem.” He gave Megatron a pointed look.

“I don't know what you mean.” Megatron waved him off and turned back toward the door. “In any case, I've done my duty. Kindly refrain from calling me out in front of the flock in the morn.”

It happened so frequently, Megatron often wondered if he was less Liege of his flock, and more shepherd of a clowder of unruly cats. A fair percentage of his flock was outspoken, and had no compunctions about raising their voices to him.

“I make no promises.” Perceptor's attention returned to Drift, and he nuzzled his mate's forehead. “Come along, buttercup. I hear there is a scientist in need of grooming in the springs.”

Drift's back plumage raised and rustled. “Mmm. Are we getting a private pool?” His chest rumbled invitingly.

Time to go.

If they were going to flirt, it was Megatron's cue to leave. Sadly, they didn't notice his departure, even with him being kind enough to tug the tie keeping their curtain open. If they started rutting, Megatron didn't want someone wandering in on them without warning or invitation.

He stepped back into the main hallway and the still silence of a late evening. It was comforting to know his flock was settling down to sleep, cozy and safe.

Megatron ruffled his feathers and headed toward his own nest, though lonely and empty it might be. It was past time that he got some sleep of his own.

~

Megatron woke to bright slats of sunlight streaming across his eyes. He resisted the urge to pull a pillow over his face, as childish as it would be. After all, he had given Soundwave this task a long time ago.

His Speaker was not to blame for Megatron's own unwillingness to rise early.

“Appointment with Ratchet today,” Soundwave informed him as he stepped away from the window and the curtain he'd drawn. On his shoulder, Laserbeak twittered agreement. “Lateness not advised.”

“I remember,” Megatron grumbled. He hauled himself out of the twist of light blankets and pillows he called a nest and rose to his full height, stretching out his arms. It was starting to get warm as spring headed into summer, however, which meant he'd be discarding the blankets entirely soon.

“Anything happen I should know about?”

“Negative.” Soundwave slipped a talon under the edge of his mask, adjusting it and giving Megatron a brief glimpse of the scars striking across his jaw.

“Breakfast?”

Soundwave's plumage ruffled. “On the table.”

Megatron grinned. “I don't know what I'd do without you, Soundwave.” He snagged two oranges from the bowl of assorted fruits and nuts on the table – all his favorites and none of his dislikes. “And after Ratchet?”

“Promised visit to Cradle.”

Megatron tried not to tense as he peeled the orange, his talon easily slicing through the rind. “Yes, I remember now.” He loved the fledglings, honestly he did.

But they were also a painful reminder of what he could not have.

“Anything else?”

Soundwave shook his head and patted Laserbeak's crown. His smallest sibling purred as she knocked her head against his. “Liege's choice,” he said, with a hint of humor.

Megatron tilted his chin in acknowledgment. “Understood. Thank you, Soundwave.”

His Speaker dipped his head in a nod and took his leave. He had his own duties to attend, though he'd adopted waking Megatron as one of them. It was in Soundwave's blood to be a caretaker. He'd taken on the task of raising his siblings – related and adopted – when no one else would.

Megatron finished off his breakfast, trying to ignore the niggle of disquiet in his belly. It had no true origin, just a sense of restlessness as of late. He chalked it up to his instincts, making their presence known again.

He should have mated years ago.

Stretching and fluffing his feathers, Megatron left his nest and headed for the medical center that his chief physician, a strong-willed bara named Ratchet, called his domain. Ratchet was unmated and divided his time between running the medical center and volunteering in the Cradle.

He was even older than Megatron. Why Ratchet had yet to take a mate, Megatron did not know. And it was not his place to ask. Unless Ratchet became visibly depressed or unhappy, his choices were his own to make.

Though if Ratchet continued to overwork himself, Megatron might force the healer into a sabbatical leave. There were others who could temporarily assume Ratchet's duties. Yes, Megatron's flock was small. But each and every member of it was important to him. He would not see anyone strain themselves.

Megatron stepped through the open doorway of the medical center and peered into the reception area. There was no one in sight, and all of the privacy curtains had been drawn.

So Ratchet had no patients. Could it be? Was the healer taking a moment to rest?

But, no. There he was, emerging from behind the thick curtain that separated his private nest from the medical center. Ratchet could not be convinced to nest elsewhere. Work was his life, he claimed. He needed nothing else.

As far as Megatron knew, he never even used the secondary door that opened to the hallway.

“There you are,” the old medic rasped as he swept a talon across his reddish plumage. He was a massive bara, only a little smaller than Megatron himself, and having seen Ratchet spar with the warriors, Megatron knew he could put up a suitable challenge, if he so desired. “Didn’t Soundwave wake you up in time?”

Megatron's inability to wake himself was something of a running joke amongst those he considered his command team. As chief healer, Ratchet was included in that group. As were Soundwave, Shockwave, and Orion.

“Our missing smol returned last night, making for a long evening.” Megatron rubbed at his forehead and eyed Ratchet. “Speaking of whom, I trust Starscream made his way in to see you?”

Ratchet waved him toward an examination hammock and snorted. “Of course not. But never you mind. I’ll track him down myself.”

“I do not envy you that task.”

“You shouldn’t envy Starscream forcing me to do so.” Ratchet planted his hands on his hips, giving Megatron a quick once-over. “Well, any complaints I should know about before I get started? Aches? Pains? Unusual morning expulsions?”

Megatron blinked as he made himself comfortable. “I take it the last was a joke.”

“What? You don’t recognize humor when you see it?” Ratchet smirked. My, he was in a fine mood this morning. Perhaps he’d finally taken Perceptor and Drift up on their offer. A little rutting could only help Ratchet’s often irascible temper.

“As near as I can tell, I am in perfect health,” Megatron said.

Ratchet circled around him. “Mm. I’ll be the judge of that. You haven’t rutted as long as I’ve known you, my liege. And that is not healthy.”

“Yes, but--”

“Ep-ep-ep. Don’t give me the same tired excuses you always give me.” Ratchet paused behind Megatron and leaned down, examining his wing joints. “You know what my answer is gonna be.”

Megatron bit back a sigh and tried not to flinch as Ratchet’s primary claw dug into his joint, just beneath a tight cluster of feathers. “I’ll take your medical advice into consideration.”

“No, you won’t.” Ratchet snorted and removed his talon, circling back around. “Just like the rest of the molters in here, you aren’t going to listen to me until it’s too late.”

Megatron's lip curled toward a smirk. “One could say the same about you, Ratchet. When was the

last time your nest was occupied?”

“Two weeks ago, I'll have you know.” Ratchet grinned, and his eyes sparkled with a sharp humor. “One can rut without mating, you know.”

“I'm aware.”

“Sometimes, I'm not so sure.” Ratchet gave him a stern glare. “You're also not properly groomed. Am I going to have to tell Orion on you or will you be a good little fledgeling and ask for help?”

He gritted his teeth. “You do not have to report on me like a carrier I don't need, medic. I will approach Orion and Shockwave on my own.” Or he would make a request of Soundwave, though it was always harder to catch his Speaker in a free moment. Wrangling five younger brothers was a job into itself.

“You had better. I'll be asking them in a week just to make sure,” Ratchet said.

There were times Megatron regretted appointing Ratchet as the chief physician for his flock. Ratchet was talented, intelligent, and his strength commanded respect. There were few baras as singularly powerful or intimidating, and he kept Megatron's flock in perfect health.

But his casual disrespect was aggravating on occasion.

It made Megatron wonder what had driven Ratchet to Kaon in the first place, and whether he was perhaps an ousted Liege of his own. Soundwave's research had not turned up much in the way of information, save that Ratchet was from the Protihex flock, which came as no surprise. Most healers were born, raised, and educated in Protihex.

Megatron meant it, however. He did not care what had driven a harpy to the Kaon flock, so long as they weren't a danger.

Their secrets were their own to keep. Even if Ratchet was formerly a liege, it was no business of Megatron's, unless Ratchet felt keen on sharing it. For now, Megatron would handle the disrespect the same way he handled everything else – with patience and dignity.

An hour of snarking later, Megatron was freed from the confines of Ratchet's territory, with yet another admonishment and recommendation. It wasn't healthy, Ratchet said. He needed to give in to his instincts before they took him over. Harpies weren't meant to be alone. They needed intimacy, even if it wasn't that of a mate.

Megatron had no family. The closest he considered were Orion and Soundwave, and both had their own nests to consider.

Lucky that he was Liege. He could consider the entire flock his family, and more often than not, that was enough to satisfy his instincts.

Until he visited the Cradle.

There were only six fledglings right now. There would be more, but Soundwave preferred to keep his siblings with him at all times. He was never seen without at least one hanging from his feathers.

The oldest of the current fledges was bright yellow and white. Sunspot was Sunstorm's, and as to

who had sired the fledgling, Sunstorm would not admit. He had come to Kaon already heavy with egg and in desperate need of medical attention. He wouldn't even say which flock had been his home.

Megatron suspected that Sunstorm, like so many of the harpies in his flock, was running from both someone and something. Perhaps even the sire. There were many flocks like Vos who were strict with their smols, possessive even, and paid little attention to how their smols were treated by their bara mates. It would surprise Megatron very little if Sunstorm had escaped from an abusive mate.

Still, like all else, it did not matter. Sunstorm was an exceptional member of Megatron's flock. He was a fine addition. And he had risen to become their spiritual leader in short time – despite Megatron's own atheism.

Megatron would fight to protect him as would many other members of his flock.

Heatwave and Chase were the next eldest fledglings, brothers but not twins, with Heatwave a full year older than Chase. Bright red and blue respectively, they were Mirage and Tracks' fledglings, both of whom hailed from Crystal City. Mirage had come to Kaon to keep an eye on Orion as a favor to his mentor, but had opted to stay once he realized how much his mate flourished in Kaon.

Boulder was the next eldest, a bright green fledgling who could charm even the surliest of harpies in the flock. He was an orphan, left abandoned for reasons unknown, but he'd been adopted by Mirage and Tracks, and they considered him as blood. He was the friendliest youngling Megatron had ever met and could often be found snoozing in the lap of whomever was on duty.

He and Ratchet got along well. Something in Boulder's spirit seemed to tame Ratchet's grumpy core.

The youngest fledgling had only hatched just prior to his carrier's arrival. He was a dark grey and red hatchling by the name of Skydive. He was quiet, patient, and right now, he was Megatron's favorite. His carrier was Whirl, another of Megatron's guard and occasional artisan, and of the fledgling's sire, Megatron did not know. Whirl often joked Skydive was the result of an immaculate conception.

There was sadness in the joke, however, and Whirl's eyes often darkened if one knew how to look. His eyes – or eye rather – wasn't the one of a harpy who'd gladly fled an abusive mate, but one who'd left because he'd had no other choice.

Such stories were also common in Kaon. While many came here seeking harbor, others came here because they had little choice. Foisted from their own flocks for the audacity of being different, Kaon was their only refuge. Megatron suspected Whirl's arrival had something to do with the fact he'd been a carrying bara.

Shockwave was the caretaker on duty today. He usually only took one shift every couple of weeks, his research eating up the majority of his time. As Megatron arrived, he found the fledgelings were down for their midday nap, and Shockwave was curled on the observation hammock, nose buried in a book.

He smiled when he noticed Megatron, however, and marked his place, putting down what looked to be a fantasy novel of some kind. It was too small for his hands, which meant he had probably borrowed it from the humans. He and Perceptor, prior to Starscream's arrival, had the most contact with their non-feathered allies.

“Hello, Megatron.” Shockwave eased out of the hammock and pulled his arms into a long stretch,

the scars along the limbs more obvious as he did so. "I hear Starscream returned last night."

"And of his own accord," Megatron replied with a smile. He peered over the small rail into the large cradle, where five fledglings curled together in a pool of colorful feathers. One could hardly tell where the first began and the last ended. "He was at the university."

"So Perceptor was right?"

"Yes. And he intends to never let me forget either."

Shockwave chuckled, though he kept it soft so as not to disturb the sleeping little ones. "That does sound like Percy. You read him the riot act?"

Megatron arched an eyebrow. "You think I'm that cruel? I only informed him of the rules."

"You've a core of fluff, my liege," Shockwave teased.

It was a miracle Shockwave had maintained his humor. If one were to look at him, they'd wonder why. A laboratory accident – one he admitted was his own fault – had taken an eye from him and left his face scarred. He was missing a couple fingers on his left hand and some of the feathers on his chest and wings had never grown back. Worse was that he'd lost his entire right wing from the elbow down.

He now used a prosthetic, one made for him by Perceptor working in concert with the humans at Kaon University. He'd had the prosthetic as long as Megatron had known him, and he could use it almost as nimbly as original limb. It enabled him to fly, albeit short distances.

Megatron made a noncommittal noise and leaned against the railing, looking down at the sleeping fledgelings. Heatwave twitched in his sleep and kicked Sunspot in the shoulder. The yellow fledgeling made a noise of disapproval and rolled over, cuddling closer to Skydive.

Shockwave leaned on the rail next to him. "Have you plans after supper?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Megatron said as he shifted his gaze to the other bara. "Why?"

"Orion and I have something we wish to ask you." Shockwave looked away, as though he were uncertain, though the only time Megatron had ever seen him less than confident was when he admitted he wished to ask Orion to mate with him and feared the answer.

Megatron managed a grin. "Well, Ratchet has been getting on to me about my scapulae." He tilted his head. "Even exchange?"

Shockwave chuckled. "It is doctor's orders. I'm sure Orion will agree, too. He did mention you looked in need of a good grooming session."

"He would notice."

"Mm."

The light click of footsteps announced the arrival of another harpy. Megatron and Shockwave both looked up to find Hot Rod easing his way into the nap room, first peering around the corner and then inching inside.

Ah. Megatron did remember Hot Rod mentioning he'd been given a few shifts in the Cradle. Megatron was supposed to have spoken to Soundwave about that. Hot Rod wasn't a terrible caretaker, but it was still not a task that suited him.

"Am I interrupting?" Hot Rod asked, wise enough to keep his voice low. There was a tangible droop to his feathers this morning, as though he'd lost some of the energy he usually carried in abundance.

Shockwave shook his head, feathers rustling. "Not at all. Our liege was just stopping by for his weekly visit."

"An ill-timed one, apparently." Megatron straightened. "I happened to catch the bitlets during their afternoon nap and not even I'm brave enough to interrupt that."

Hot Rod chuckled quietly. "How wise of you." He moved closer, peering into the cradle. "They look so peaceful."

"For now. It is all a lie, however, for when they wake, they will continue to be tyrants." Shockwave lightly rapped the pads of his fingers on the railing. "Are you here to assist me, Hot Rod?"

Hot Rod beamed, some of the glow returning to his face. "Yep. I'm assigned to the Cradle for the rest of the week."

"An assignment I intend to have changed for the next cycle," Megatron said. He folded his arms over his chest, refusing to look into the basket like a lovelorn carrier. "I'm sure we have other tasks that are better suited for you."

Hot Rod's face colored. His smile wiped away. "I told you, I'm happy to help wherever I'm needed."

"And I told you that such sacrifices weren't necessary," Megatron reiterated, with perhaps a touch more firmness than was necessary. But by Adaptus could Hot Rod be stubborn.

The smol's jaw set. His eyes narrowed.

Shockwave coughed softly. "I will appreciate Hot Rod's assistance today and any other day," he said, drawing Megatron's attention back toward him. "The hatchlings, from what I've seen, seem to adore him."

Probably because they were, on some level, of equal maturity.

Megatron rubbed his palm down his face. "Whichever makes you happy." He waved a hand, dismissing the discussion. There were more important matters to debate than whether or not a harpy wanted a specific duty. "I'll leave you to it then. I don't wish to be in the way."

"Or perhaps you want to make yourself scarce before they wake." Shockwave grinned, his eye sparkling with humor. "I'll see you later tonight, my liege."

"I promise not to be late for once." Megatron nodded to Hot Rod. "Speak with Soundwave. He'll have a better assignment for you. I'll ensure it." He left no room for argument in his tone.

Hot Rod huffed and folded his arms, flame-colored feathers forming a shield around his body. "Yes,

my liege,” he bit out, though his feathers twitched with annoyance.

Megatron looked at him. He fought for something to say, and settled on nothing. Instead, he spun on a tarsal and took his leave. He pretended he did not feel the weight of Hot Rod’s gaze following him out.

It was a constant thing as of late, Hot Rod watching him, often from afar. He knew the smol’s attraction was not dissuaded by the lack of Megatron returning his interest. Which was, in a way, a lie.

Any other time, any other situation, any other life perhaps, Megatron would have gladly taken Hot Rod to nest. He simply couldn’t, in good conscience, do so now.

Megatron rubbed at his face with a sigh. Complications, he did not need them. Instead, he sought out a distraction.

There were many duties for a Liege in his aerie. Becoming familiar with his flock and their interests was one of the most important ones, in Megatron’s opinion. He had so few, under a hundred, that he knew them all personally.

Mid-morning was the daily training session for the guard, led by his fencemaster. Drift had been delighted that more were willing to study the art of swordplay, though most still preferred to rely on fangs and talons if it came down to a fight.

Barring that, Megatron could visit Perceptor in his laboratory, or see if he was getting along any better with Brainstorm. He needed to check in at the supply cavern and ensure they were not low on anything. He could also stand to hunt down Starscream and make sure he hadn’t caught ill after his evening spent in the rain.

Ruffling his feathers, Megatron headed for central column, preparing to glide down to the bottom floor. He might as well observe the training first. He could even learn a thing or two.

There was no rest for the liege of a flock. Fortunately, Megatron preferred it that way.

Chapter 3

In the end, Megatron found himself making the rounds of his aerie, from the ground floor to the top level, and all the ones in between.

He visited the training arena first. The new swordmasters, under Drift's careful guidance, were coming along nicely. Drift tried goading Megatron into picking up a blade, but Megatron had demurred per the usual. He knew how to use a sword, along with many other weapons as a matter of course, he simply preferred not to do so. He didn't need a physical weapon to defend himself. His size, speed, and talons were more than enough.

The research center was next. They were a series of small rooms connected by open doorways and a main set of actual double doors rather than curtains for the safety of everyone in the aerie. Here, Megatron learned that Perceptor had stumbled across a promising new herb that might be useful in curing the early summer whooping cough which often afflicted the fledgelings and those weak of constitution – whether by prior illness or age.

Megatron praised Perceptor for the discovery, and slipped past Brainstorm's laboratory before he could be accosted by the smol scientist with another request for access to the humans' explosive technology.

Midmorning, the Gatherers returned with baskets full of cherries, apricots, and pine nuts. Megatron tagged that particular duty as one to suggest to Soundwave for Hot Rod. Such a task would suit the energetic smol, and it helped that it would keep him from the aerie for half the day, and out of temptation's reach.

Megatron spent lunch in the pantry, going over their stock with Orion, who had everything organized efficiently and down to the last nut. Some of today's gathering would go into stores for winter, when certain things were harder to come by. He grazed as they chatted, and Orion reminded him again of their appointment this evening.

Honestly, it was as if they thought Megatron incapable of remembering his schedule. The fact that Soundwave kept him on task did not count!

Post-lunch, Megatron escaped the aerie for a flight. Yesterday, it had been dull and dreary, damp with a lingering rainstorm which sent most of his flock indoors, away from the threat of wet feathers. Today, the sky was crisp and bright and blue, with not a cloud in sight.

The higher he climbed, the more he could see. Mountains on the horizon, tall jagged peaks that separated Kaon from Polyhex. The towers of Kaon University opposite, square and stunted. If he flew closer, he could follow the roads away from the school, over the mountains, to the human city Kolkular which boasted a population larger than any one aerie on the entire planet.

It was what they called a metropolis. Megatron had only seen it from a distance. It was almost as large as Metroplex, the human metropolis nearest to Megatron's home aerie.

Far to the south, miles and miles of grassland swayed pale and green in the wind, until they blended with the sky. And to the north, a heat mirage where the land turned jagged, rocky on its way to the Tarn province, though heaps of forest grew in between, lush and full of growth, both new and old.

From the moment Megatron had arrived here, weary and haggard, with Orion and Soundwave and his Speaker's siblings suffering from the same, he'd had a feeling Kaon would make a good home. He'd worried, at first, about the humans. But they'd managed to co-exist peacefully with the science-minded humans. The truce had held for over a decade, so that Megatron's only worry became outside humans.

It helped that Kaon University was and had always been isolated from human settlements. The nearest one was a day away, by harpy flight, though shorter by human contraption.

Kaon was a good home.

Megatron turned back toward his aerie, his spirits lifted, not that they'd been low to start, but a good flight helped to clear his head. He landed on one of the many perches built into the roof of the aerie, which was as much empty branch as it was leaf-heavy, with thicker branches woven together in a tight lattice to keep out the rain. Here and there he caught the glint of solar panels, which powered the few electrical devices they kept.

Megatron descended, though with less nimbleness than a smol might, his weight dislodging leaves and sending them raining down, only to be caught in the netting hung just below the roof. There was always work to be done, including what was no doubt a pile of documents on his work-desk, courtesy of Orion.

He would start on those first.

Megatron took the long way down. Rather than glide through the central atrium, he opted for the slower walk down the central slope. It made him more accessible as a leader, he found, and he preferred that to those who kept themselves elevated and apart from their people.

Like the aerie and flock he'd left behind, for example. Nova Prime had rarely deigned to interact with the common folk, and certainly would have never stooped to walking anywhere if he could help it. No, if Nova had somewhere to be, he either flew himself or was carried in a sling of the finest silk. Megatron would be surprised if dirt had ever graced the Prime's tarsal talons.

Megatron passed by the Cradle on his way down and Megatron could not resist the urge to peek in at the little ones. They would be up from their nap by now and either eagerly gorging on a snack, or running rampant on their caretakers, or even both.

Looking in turned out to be a mistake.

Most of the hatchlings were under Shockwave's supervision as he parked them around a large bowl and assisted them with shoveling a rice-fruit paste into their mouth. Megatron counted two missing: Skydive and Sunspot. He found them all too quickly, in Hot Rod's lap, where he also held a book and was reading to them.

Megatron could neither hear him or see the title, so he didn't know what captivated them, but it surprised him to see Hot Rod so still and focused. Patient even. Sunstorm had a hand shoved in his mouth, sucking on his fist. Skydive eagerly leaned forward, his eyes big and round and interested.

It was an adorable sight. Megatron's core pinged again. He would not have that. He would never have that. No matter how much he wished.

And then Hot Rod looked up, as though he sensed he were being watched. His eyes met

Megatron's, and his face pinked around his nose.

An unholy throb of heat raced through Megatron's body. His veins all but sang with it. Try as he might, as often as he ignored Hot Rod's overtures, the fact remained he was attracted to the smol. And his instincts knew it.

Megatron spun around and told himself it wasn't a retreat. He wasn't afraid, even as Hot Rod's eyes burned at the back of his mind. Blue, so blue, like the clear sky he'd just soared through.

He went to his office. He closed the curtain that served as his door and was a signal to his flock he wasn't up to guests. He sat at his desk, where sure enough a stack of items waited for his attention.

His core pounded. Heat soared through his veins.

Megatron poured himself a cup of water, swallowed it over a lump in his throat, and stared at the stack of documents. His thoughts were wild, pinging from one fantasy to a next. He let himself dream until the count of ten. And then he slowly, ever so slowly, closed his fist around the fantasy.

Crunch. It crumpled like paper, balled up and tossed into the wastebin.

He got back to work, and devoted himself to it, until the shadows of the sun on his wall shifted, and it was time for supper. Evening meals were as communal as possible in his flock. Megatron encouraged the sense of community and family. They were a small flock. The more they relied upon one another, the stronger they would be as a whole.

Megatron rose from his chair, groaning as his limbs and back protested the hours spent hunched over the desk. He pulled himself into a languid stretch, heard his joints popping and crackling. He wasn't old, not in comparison to some in his flock, but he still felt the weight of the years on his shoulders.

Perhaps he really should take Drift up on his offer to take part in the daily lessons. The martial arts and physicality required would help keep Megatron in shape. It would also ensure he kept those particular skills sharp and practiced, lest he forget.

Megatron rolled his head to ease the cramp in his neck and pulled back the curtain to his office, stepping into the busy late afternoon of his aerie. The wonderful smell of dinner was already clinging to the air – someone had made poppyseed bread – and it caused his mouth to water. Right now, their culinary genius was Whirl, and he deserved the title.

He climbed up the ramp toward the second level, where the huge common room was located directly next to the food preparation area. Conveniently, food storage was a level directly below, and Perceptor had devised a lift system to connect the two levels, making it easier for food stuffs to be delivered between the two areas.

His flock trickled into the common room, already half-occupied by the early arrivals, many of whom volunteered to set the table and fill the water pitchers. Megatron paused just inside the doorway, surveying the gathered, pride blooming in his core. He might never have a mate and fledge to call his own, but he would always have this.

It would have to be enough.

Someone politely coughed behind him and Megatron stepped aside, aware that he was blocking the doorway. "My apologies."

“Lost in thought, my liege?”

Megatron looked down to see Hot Rod beaming up at him, one hand pressed to Sunspot’s back as the hatchling clung to his chest. One hand gripped Hot Rod’s feathers, the other was firmly shoved in the little bit’s mouth, spittle soaking his fingers.

“Something to that effect,” he replied and stroked a gentle knuckle over Sunspot’s crest. The hatchling gurgled around his fist and grinned.

He’d spotted Sunstorm already in the common room, helping to fill the pitchers. Hot Rod must have volunteered to bring Sunspot to him. It wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. Shockwave, in fact, was juggling both Heatwave and Chase as he was in conversation with Mirage, who carried Boulder.

Communal hatchling care. It was just as important to Megatron as everything else he insisted upon. No parent should go without the assistance they needed.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a moment to spare then, would you?” Hot Rod asked, something painfully earnest in his tone.

Megatron met Hot Rod’s gaze. “Right now?”

Hot Rod shook his head, feathers fluttering around his face. “No, I mean. After dinner. I thought maybe you’d like to go for a flight?” The hope in his expression squeezed Megatron’s core.

Megatron often joined his flock on flights, individual or otherwise. Many of his flock liked to talk about things during the privacy of a flight, coming to him with their concerns or their wishes. To turn Hot Rod down would be unusual, though he suspected there was an ulterior motive to the request.

“I’ve already stretched my wings today,” Megatron hedged, careful to keep his tone gentle and not the soul of rejection.

Judging by the way the smile faded from Hot Rod’s face, he failed. Disappointment darkened his eyes. Even his head feathers drooped. “Oh.”

Adaptus save him.

Megatron sighed softly. “I have a matter that needs my attention this evening, but afterward, I suppose another flight wouldn’t be out of order. There is something to be said for a night under the stars.”

There was no denying the delight that lit over Hot Rod’s face. “Meet you up top then?”

Megatron nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Hot Rod’s grin got larger, sweeter, and it was all Megatron could do to keep himself from pulling the beautiful smol into his arms. With Sunspot clinging to his front, he looked like the perfect mate.

“Hot Rod!”

Sunstorm’s call split the air between them, and Megatron heaved a sigh of relief as Hot Rod dipped his head to take his leave, moving over to where Sunstorm beckoned. Joy showed itself in the eager lift and twitch of Hot Rod’s feathers. In the smile on his face and the light in his eyes, and the curious

look Sunstorm shot Megatron's direction.

Megatron ground his teeth and cursed himself for being so weak. He had no business building Hot Rod's hopes.

On the other hand, a private conversation with Hot Rod, away from the hustle and bustle of the aerie, might be what he needed to set the smol straight. To get him to understand that his hopes were for naught. It would hurt, to shatter Hot Rod's core, but it was for the best. Sometimes, an early pain, however harsh, saved much ache in the future.

It was the only course of action Megatron had left.

He sighed and set off to join his flock for dinner.

~

Shockwave and Orion accosted him once the meal was done.

"I believe someone is in need of grooming," Orion said with a large grin as he hooked an elbow through Megatron's.

Shockwave appeared on Megatron's opposite side, claiming his other arm. "And we did say we had something we wanted to talk to you about."

Megatron chuckled as they all but bumrushed him down the ramp and toward the bathing springs. "I am at your mercy. Since you insist. Far be it from me to resist."

"You never stood a chance," Orion teased, his voice full of warmth and affection, the smile on his face infectious.

Megatron could never remember a time Orion had looked so happy and free back in Crystal City. He'd always appeared as though he were trapped in a cage back then, sitting on a perch and staring out at a world he couldn't touch. Megatron never once asked Orion if he regretted leaving before he could ascend the Primacy. He'd never needed to ask. The answer was written in Orion's joy.

Luck was with them. When they arrived at the bathing springs, they found it deserted. That probably wouldn't last for long, but at least it meant they were allowed their choice of pools. Orion and Shockwave led him to a larger, shallower one in the back where they would have some privacy. Whatever they wanted to talk about was serious. Odd since they hadn't opted for a flight instead.

Megatron sank into the warm water with a little sigh. The lingering twinges from the hours he'd spent hunched at his desk started to fade. Orion joined him with a little splash, the water lapping at the rock outcropping that kept it contained. It took Shockwave a little longer, as he had to find a safe place to set his prosthetic so the water wouldn't ruin it.

"I'm guessing your scapulae need work," Orion said as he waded toward Megatron, twirling one finger. "Turn around."

"You know me all too well."

“Since fledgeling-hood after all,” Orion teased as Megatron turned, offering his back to Orion as he did to few others.

Megatron had always been slow to trust, but Orion was right. He’d known the younger harpy nearly their entire life. Megatron had always known he’d serve on the Prime’s honor guard, and when he came of age, he was assigned to the young heir. Since his genitors had served under Nova Prime, Megatron had been an approved playmate for the primeling.

“Sometime, you’ll have to tell me embarrassing stories about my mate when he was a fledgling,” Shockwave said as he eased slowly into the springs. He plucked at the pale feathers of his damaged arm, frowning over ingrown leavings.

“He’ll do no such thing!” Orion retorted, and though Megatron could not see his face, he imagined Orion had colored. He’d been a mostly quiet fledgling, but because of that, his mischief often went unnoticed.

“Perhaps if I offer a suitable bribe?” Shockwave teased.

Orion snorted. “Megatron cannot be bribed. He actually has principles.”

By Adaptus, they were far too adorable together. Times like this, guilt ate at Megatron, for the secrets he held in his core, and the envy he’d always harbored toward Shockwave. The scientist hadn’t stolen anything that wasn’t his to romance away in the first place.

It was Megatron’s fault for letting his own cowardice and indecision lose him the opportunity to confess his feelings.

Shockwave chuckled. “Every harpy has his weaknesses.”

Just then, Orion’s talon dug into the softer down between Megatron’s wings. Ratchet was right in this, at least. Megatron had needed someone to groom him. He purred in delight as the itchy spot received attention.

Orion chuckled. “Oh. You are weak to this then,” he said as he dug his claws deeper, right down to the flesh, getting at a spot that had been bothering Megatron for days. “I’d better be careful else I’ll be accused of having our liege under my thumb.”

“He’s a stronger mind than that I’m sure, love,” Shockwave from where he stood behind Orion, delicately grooming his mate’s scapulae as well.

“I don’t know,” Megatron said as his head leaned forward and his shoulders flexed. “At this point, I’m tempted to have him name a need if only so that he doesn’t stop.”

Shockwave laughed.

Orion’s talon dug inward, finally scraping loose a feather leaving that hadn’t worked itself free. “The truth, my liege, is that you need a mate of your own,” he said as he flicked the leaving away and went back to work.

Megatron tried not to tense. Orion knew him too well not to recognize it immediately. Was that the topic they intended to address right now? “I have a flock to look after, Orion. That doesn’t leave

much time for a mate.”

“Not even, perhaps, one who is very bright, beautiful, and eager to share your nest?” Shockwave proposed, nothing but innocence in his tone, but he could be just as devious as his mate.

Megatron sighed. He palmed his face. “Has he recruited you then?”

“Not at all. Merely an observation.” Shockwave’s tone was far too cheery and too innocent to be believed. “Many of us have watched you dance around each other.”

“And we wonder why you do not take that which is so freely offered.” Orion’s hands rested on his shoulders. He leaned against Megatron from behind, peering from the side to look up at him. His eyes were a deeper, darker blue than Hot Rod’s, but just as captivating. “You wish happiness for all in your flock. Why not seek it for yourself?”

Megatron patted Orion’s right hand and gently spun to face his dear friend, ignoring the squeeze of his core as Orion drew back closer to Shockwave.

“I am happy,” Megatron replied. It wasn’t even a lie.

He was happy. He was free of the constraints of Crystal City. Soundwave and his siblings were safe. Megatron’s flock was one of refugees and outcasts, all free to pursue their own dreams and romantic interests without the laws of their respective birth flocks.

Megatron’s flock was small, but loyal and stable. They had good relations with the humans. Their aerie was comfortable and secure. They were in close proximity to bathing springs, fresh water and a stable source of food.

Megatron had no reason to be discontent.

He had friends and family-by-choice. He needed nothing else. He did not need a mate to be happy, no matter what his instincts raged.

“And while Hot Rod is very pleasant to look at, I do not think we are suited to one another,” Megatron added with a smile.

“It doesn’t have to be Hot Rod,” Orion replied with a sigh and a shake of his head. “I just want you to be as happy as I am.”

Megatron chuckled. Orion’s core had always been three sizes too large. It was one of the reasons he’d been so beloved in their flock. His sire had never understood that. Had, even, considered it a weakness, one no leader should ever carry. How Orion managed to be so caring and considerate with Nova and Sentinel as his parents, Megatron never understood.

“I am,” Megatron replied. “And I will be. Fret not, my friend.” He grabbed the bucket, poured water down his back, and then clambered free of the bathing pool. “Now, did you two not wish to speak with me about something? Surely it wasn’t just to inquire about my romantic intentions toward Hot Rod.”

Orion chuckled. “No. That was a benefit.”

He and Shockwave exchanged glances before they stepped free of the bathing pool as well. Feathers

flicked and twitched, freeing themselves of the weight of the warm water. Megatron had to admit, Ratchet was right. He felt all the better for having his scapulae cleaned.

“We actually had good news we wanted to share,” Shockwave said as he shook the last of the water from his full wing.

“Very good news,” Orion echoed and drifted further into Shockwave’s embrace, his good arm coming up around Orion’s shoulder.

The mated couple shared another warm smile and glance.

Megatron tilted his head. Good news? They were already mated. This could only mean...

His gaze drifted over Orion. Who held a hand over his abdomen. Who was glowing with pride, who had declined Megatron’s offers to go flying all this week, and had been consuming an awful lot of peaches as of late, especially for someone who proclaimed to hate them.

The two mates shared a warm glance between them. It was times like these, Megatron could not even bring himself to hurt or feel sorry for himself.

Orion was happy. And more than anything that was all Megatron could want. While he wished things could be different, that he wasn't broken and he'd had the courage to confess, he was glad Orion could be happy.

Shockwave was a good harpy. He was kind and intelligent and thoughtful and he treated Orion with kindness and respect. Megatron couldn't ask for anything more.

“It was a little unexpected, but not unwanted,” Orion murmured as they pressed their noses together. But then his cheeks pinked, and he broke away, meeting Megatron's gaze instead. “We wanted to tell you first, before we told everyone else.”

“Orion's carrying,” Shockwave blurted. He all but vibrated with happiness, his green eyes shining with pride. “We're going to have a little one soon.”

It was as he suspected. But best to pretend he hadn’t already guessed, to feign surprise. “Wait. You-- You're carrying?” Megatron said.

Orion nodded and stroked his free hand over his abdomen, where eventually, his belly would swell with an egg. “Yes. Ratchet confirmed it this morning.”

That fragging--

He had known and told Megatron to seek out Orion and Shockwave anyway. Ratchet certainly hadn't done so to be cruel as he wasn’t aware of the affection hiding in Megatron’s core, but still.

They would have words.

“Congratulations!” Megatron said, and it was not hard to say. He was happy for them.

He took each of their hands, pressing them together. “I mean that, congratulations. I am happy to hear it.” He surprised himself with how little he had to fake his joy.

“Thank you.” Orion's face turned pink, and he gave his mate a shy look. “We also hoped to ask that you'd be their godsire, if anything should happen.”

Megatron could not be more shocked. “I am honored,” he said. “But surely you would prefer a mated couple to raise your bitlet?”

Shockwave shook his head. “We trust that should anything happen to us, you would give our fledgeling the greatest of care.”

“Besides,” Orion said with a smile. “You have Soundwave never far from your side, and we both trust that he can step in whenever you need help.”

“Well, that is true.” Megatron's grin wobbled. He hoped neither of them noticed. “I will gladly do so. But know that nothing will happen to you two. I will make sure of it.”

“I know you will.” Orion's tone was warm. He squeezed Megatron's hand. “I have never been safer than when I had you to guard me.” He paused and his face pinked further. “I mean--”

Shockwave chuckled. “It's all right, love. I know what you meant.” He leaned in, nuzzling Orion's cheek. “Old habits die hard.”

“That may be true. But it was another life. I was a different harpy then. I don't want you to think I miss it,” Orion replied.

“You're allowed to miss it, love.” Shockwave stroked the back of his hand against Orion's cheek. “It is and will always be a part of you. I know you're happy with me. That is what matters.”

Megatron chewed on the inside of his cheek. They always did this. And while it could be, at times, adorable, it was also awkward. Especially when it felt like his core was trying to thud right out of his chest, and his entire body seemed to be shaking.

He was happy for them. He was.

He just didn't think he could stand here and watch them be so happy together. Not at this moment.

Megatron coughed into his hand. “Congratulations,” he repeated, again, and hoped it didn't sound like a lie. “It looks like you're both entering that stage where I won't see either of you out of the nest for a couple of weeks. So I'll make sure to have Soundwave assign someone to assist you with your duties.”

They both had the grace to blush. And though they put a distance between them, Megatron was rather certain it didn't count as one. He had the feeling that if he had not been present, they would already be halfway to rutting.

Adaptus spare him from the newly-gravid.

“Thank you, my liege.” Shockwave dipped his head. “It is appreciated.”

“Anything for my favorite mated couple,” Megatron said.

It didn't even feel like a lie.

Megatron excused himself not long after, his core troubled. Both Shockwave and Orion had expressed a desire to soak a while longer, though he doubted soaking was what they had in mind.

He doubted they would miss him. At this stage they would only have eyes for each other. Lucky that no one else had entered the springs to shatter the moment, and hopefully, no one would interrupt their 'soaking.'

Megatron stepped out of the bathing caverns, a wash of cooler air whisking away the sticky heat from the hot springs. He breathed deeply, forcing calm where he did not feel it.

His spine prickled.

Megatron half-turned as Soundwave melted out of the shadows, alone save for Buzzsaw hanging from his right shoulder, yellow eyes peering out from Soundwave's collar. No wonder no one had entered, not with Soundwave lingering in the shadows.

Had Soundwave known?

Of course he had. This was Soundwave after all. There was nothing that happened in Megatron's aerie without Soundwave discovering it.

"I'm fine," Megatron said before Soundwave could ask. He was one of the few privy to the truth. Not because Megatron had told him, but because Soundwave was both perceptive and observant.

"Lie," Soundwave said.

Megatron sighed. "By that I mean, I will be fine." He started toward the woven steps that would take them back to the first level of the aerie. Soundwave fell into step behind him, barely audible. "It is inevitable, is it not? It is the natural order of things. You fall in love. You mate. You have fledglings."

He folded his hands behind his back as he started to ascend.

"I always knew it would happen, perhaps not this quickly, but it was inevitable," Megatron continued, aware that he was babbling but seemingly incapable of stopping. "In the end, I don't know why I care since it does not matter. He was never mine. I never had hope of anything."

Somehow, it hurt all the more to say it aloud. A truth he'd always known. He'd ruthlessly ripped free the smallest tendrils of hope, yet one had somehow managed to take root anyway.

Foolish sentiment.

"You grieve."

Megatron snorted. "For what?"

"The chance not taken."

"Mmm."

Perhaps Soundwave was right. He usually was. Though Megatron suspected even if he had taken the chance, it would have amounted to the same. For the very reason he never took the chance in the

first place.

On the ground floor, Megatron turned toward his Speaker. Soundwave looked at him, inscrutable as always behind the mask. Buzzsaw, too, was silent. But then, of all Soundwave's siblings, Buzzsaw spoke the least.

"Orion and Shockwave will both need secondary assistance for the next couple of months. Will you find them someone available?"

Soundwave dipped his head. "Plan already in motion."

Megatron's lips curved in a smile. "I knew there was a reason I made you my second."

"Other than trust?"

"Other than." Megatron lowered his hands and tilted his head back, looking up, beyond the multiple levels of the aerie, to the lattice of branches and the sky beyond it. "As for me, I believe I shall go for a flight. Clear my head, so to speak."

"Company desired?"

Megatron shook his head. "No. Not this time. The gesture is appreciated, however."

"Always."

"Though you could do me a favor."

Soundwave tipped his head, a silent allowance for Megatron to continue.

"Go back and guard for them?" Megatron smiled, half-amusement, half-grief. "Something tells me they're going to forget they didn't arrange for one, and I'd hate for someone to walk in on them."

Soundwave chuckled. He dipped his head. "It will be done."

"Thank you."

He could always rely on Soundwave. Things would be so much easier if it had been Soundwave who had stolen Megatron's core, and vice versa. But alas, such was not meant to be.

Soundwave stepped back, giving Megatron room to lift himself into the air, powerful pulls of his wings lifting him higher and higher. The exertion felt good, for all that it strained his muscles. He rose through the center atrium of his aerie, passing few harpies as he did so.

This time of the evening, most were in their nests with their respective mates or whomever they chose to share their nestberth with. Megatron himself could usually be found hunched at his workdesk, reviewing any number of notes. Sometimes in the company of Soundwave. Sometimes Perceptor or Drift or Maximus or Orion swung by for a chat.

More often than not, he was alone. Such was the life of a liege. Part of his flock, but often apart from it.

Megatron passed the highest level and crested the canopy, slipping through one of the many gaps in

the branches trimmed for this purpose. Up above, the air was slightly warmer, and carried a suffocating humidity. The sky, usually a blanket of stars, only allowed pinpricks of light in between swaths of clouds. The moon barely peeked through.

In the distance, lightning flashed and thunder rumbled. Another storm was on its way. Hopefully this time, Starscream would be too occupied with Shockwave's work to go gallivanting off to the University and worrying everyone.

Somehow, Megatron suspected corralling the newly arrived smol would be much more difficult than some of the others he'd assimilated into his flock. Starscream was both stubborn and curious – an often infuriating combination.

Oh, well. Starscream wouldn't be the first unusual harpy to join Megatron's flock. And he wouldn't be the last either. Megatron made it a point to gather those others had ousted. He prided himself on offering a home to the outcasts, the outliers, the unusual.

Megatron rose a little higher, catching a stronger air current, and let himself glide. He turned toward the storm on the horizon. It hovered over Polyhex, and beyond that, Crystal City. Megatron's former Aerie.

He did not miss it.

Or perhaps that was a lie. There were parts of Crystal City he missed. His carrier and sire for one. Megatron had not told Impactor and Terminus he was leaving. There hadn't been time. With Rumble and Frenzy under threat, and Orion urging them to leave, Megatron had simply gone.

He wondered if they worried. Many times he had started a letter to them, only to take the coward's way out in the end. He had reams of parchment covered in ink stains and smears and strikethroughs. How did one apologize for abandoning his parents? How could he even begin to explain himself?

"My liege!"

Megatron startled and whipped around, searching for the origin of the call. A brightly colored smol launched himself from the top of the aerie and was now making a beeline for Megatron.

Oh. Hot Rod. He'd forgotten.

Megatron hovered in mid-air, allowing the smol to catch up to him. "I apologize, Hot Rod," he said. "There was a matter that needed my attention and I--"

"It's all right. You're Liege after all," Hot Rod rushed to say. "I know other things are more important sometimes. Are you free now or...?"

There was yearning in Hot Rod's face. His eyes were big and bright, his expression hopeful. There was something about him that made it impossible for Megatron to deny him.

It was a familiar look.

"If you still wish to join me, you may," Megatron said. "Though I doubt I have anything to offer in the way of conversation this evening." He did not have the core to entertain right now. Or offer strength to another.

Hot Rod chirped at him. "Time spent with you is enough."

Megatron's core squeezed. He forced himself to look away from the pretty smol and set his gaze back on the horizon. "If you insist." He pushed toward Tarn, though careful to keep his pace one Hot Rod could follow.

Silence fell between them, for once not awkward. Megatron allowed himself the chance to watch Hot Rod as the smol spun and flittered around him, far more energetic than Megatron had to spare.

Hot Rod truly was beautiful. Starlight glittered over his feathers. His expression was one of satisfaction, as was the small smile curving his lips. He hummed softly, barely audible to Megatron over the currents rushing past his ears. But he did have a pleasant voice.

He deserved to be happy.

"How long have you been in my flock, Hot Rod?" Megatron asked. He already knew the answer. He knew when every harpy had arrived at his aerie.

Hot Rod startled and blinked up at him. "Oh. Um. Going on two years now, my liege."

Two years. Two mating seasons. And someone as beautiful as he, as eager to have a mate, was still unclaimed.

"You are happy here?" Megatron asked.

Hot Rod chuckled softly. "Yes, my liege. Kaon is... very different from my birth flock. But it is a good different. I can't imagine being anywhere else."

The air grew colder as they drew closer to the border, and the storm growing over Tarn. Megatron felt the chill of it, the damp. He turned them back toward Kaon, and Hot Rod moved smoothly with him.

"I am glad to hear it." Megatron did not ask where Hot Rod was from. It was none of his business.

Soundwave, he was sure, knew. But unless Hot Rod wished to tell him, Megatron let the smol keep his secret as he allowed every harpy who joined his flock.

Sunstorm, for example, who had arrived in Kaon, heavy with egg, bleeding and nearly broken. He would not speak why, but saying he'd come from Vos had been enough. Megatron had seen the mating mark on Sunstorm's neck – still raw as though recently refreshed-- and yet, Sunstorm's mate had not come with him. He suspected it was because Sunstorm's bara mate was dead. Perhaps by Sunstorm's own hand.

The very sight of him had saddened Megatron to his core. He'd offered Sunstorm a home before the smol could even ask for it. The anger had set in later, fury that someone could harm another in such a way, especially a gravid smol who deserved to be pampered and cared for.

Hot Rod, however, was not from Vos. Of this Megatron was certain. He did not carry the weight of a smol frantically escaping an unkind fate. Not to mention, Hot Rod was so vividly colored, surely Sunstorm or Starscream would've recognized him.

"I wish for all of my flock to be happy," Megatron continued, because it was true. What sort of a

liege would he be if he was not invested in the happiness of his flock? “Do you not feel you would be happier with a mate?”

Hot Rod gave him another startled look. “It’s the proper order of things,” he said, though his voice was full of caution. “Or so I’m told. But--”

“Trailbreaker is seeking a mate,” Megatron said before Hot Rod could make yet another overture he would have to deny. “And has been for quite some time. He finds you attractive. Perhaps you might consider having a word with him?”

Hot Rod whipped in front of him and stalled, wings working furiously to keep him airborne. “Are you trying to... to redirect me to someone else?”

“It is a suggestion, nothing more.” Megatron reared back, keeping a careful distance between them. “I look to the happiness of my flock, Hot Rod. And I feel you and Trailbreaker would make a good match.”

Hot Rod stared at him, eyes wide and unblinking. He swallowed, visibly enough Megatron could see his throat bob.

“You are cruel, my liege,” he said at length, and his tone was tight. Hurt. “And worse that I’m not the only one you insult with that suggestion.”

Megatron narrowed his eyes. “I have told you time and again that I am not interested.”

“Yes. You have. And I’m the idiot who keeps trying anyway.” Hot Rod’s feathers fluffed, his words devolving into a hiss. “But at least being a fool is my choice. I don’t need you picking a mate for me.”

“That was not my intention.”

“It damn well was!” Hot Rod vibrated with a growing anger, but the hurt remained present, like a raw wound that Megatron knew all too well. “Spare me your pity. I don’t need it.”

He dropped suddenly, and Megatron’s core squeezed tight. He watched as Hot Rod tucked his wings in tight and spun downward. He caught his freefall with a skilled twist, and Megatron couldn’t help but marvel as the smol sped back toward Kaon, faster than Megatron knew him capable.

They were not far from home. Megatron could easily catch him, clear up matters, but he suspected it would only worsen things.

He sighed.

That hadn’t gone very well at all. But it needed to be done. Perhaps this would finally give Hot Rod the closure he needed.

Megatron gnawed on his bottom lip and set course toward home, albeit at a much slower pace. He was in no hurry to return to the cold emptiness of his nest.

Hot Rod’s hurt look continued to linger at the back of his mind.

Chapter 4

Morning arrived, and Megatron didn't need Soundwave to wake him. He'd slept very little and was already at his smaller, private desk when his second slipped into his nest, Buzzsaw perched atop his shoulder. Laserbeak was no doubt lurking somewhere nearby. The smallest twins were rarely seen one without the other.

"Eager to work?" Soundwave asked.

"Eager for a distraction," Megatron replied with a little sigh. Movement in his peripheral vision alerted him to Soundwave sliding a small plate onto his desk.

Breakfast was served. Megatron didn't ask Soundwave to do this, but his second had taken it upon himself, and now it was something of a habit. Candied pecans, a bowl of blackberries, and a dish of rolled oats.

Comfort food.

Megatron slanted a look at Soundwave. "Do you know something I don't?"

"You still grieve." Soundwave lingered, his head tilted. "And you did not sleep."

"I did. A few hours." Megatron snagged a handful of pecans and threw them into his mouth. He'd spent a good portion of the night tossing and turning in a nest-berth that felt far too large. "It was enough. Is there anything urgent today?"

"No."

"Pity." He crunched noisily on the pecans, rapping his talons on the desktop. "Did you find someone to assist Orion?"

"Affirmative."

"Good, good." Megatron exhaled audibly and gave Soundwave another look. "Are you happy here, Soundwave?"

A small laugh rose from his second's chest. "Affirmative." Soundwave rested his hand on Megatron's shoulder, unerringly finding it despite not being able to see him, the weight warm and welcome. "Question strange. What happened?"

Megatron rubbed at his forehead. "Hot Rod joined me on a flight last night. I may have offended him when I suggested he seek another mate." He lowered his hand and sighed. "My intentions were good. I want him to be happy. I need him to realize it will never be with me."

Soundwave made a non-committal noise. "Cruel, but potentially effective," he said, and there was chastisement in his tone. "However, the core is not so easily swayed. You, of all harpies, should know this."

Yes. Yes, he did.

Another sigh escaped him. "Should I apologize?"

"Explanation would also be helpful," Soundwave said and his hand slipped free of Megatron's shoulder. "But apologies are always welcome."

He was right, of course. But then, Soundwave usually was.

He excused himself afterward, leaving Megatron to consume his breakfast as he mused. The worst part of it all was that he wasn't entirely unopposed to Hot Rod. Another time, another situation, different circumstances, and Megatron had no doubt he would have chased after Hot Rod on his own.

It would be easier if Hot Rod wasn't always so present. Always around, in Megatron's periphery, within reach and enticing.

Megatron scrubbed the heel of his palm down his face. He sighed. Enough brooding. He had work to do. Rather than sit in his nest and castigate himself for repeated mistakes, he could make use of himself.

He rose from his desk and departed his nest, though he briefly floundered. What to do? Without conscious decision, he turned left, following the curve of the aerie toward the archives and the small office connected to them.

Soundwave's counsel was invaluable to him. But he could be too pragmatic for his own good. Megatron could use the advice of another, and times like these, there was only one he could rely on for the point of view he desired.

Despite yesterday's revelation, Megatron was not at all surprised to find the tapestry for Orion's workroom pinned open. He should be in his nest, cuddled up with Shockwave, but if he wanted to work, Megatron wouldn't stop him. He would ensure that assistance was available if Orion wanted it, but he couldn't force it.

Megatron braced himself and ducked through door. "Orion, I hate to bother you but..." His words trailed off as he realized Orion was not alone. "Oh, I apologize. I did not realize you were busy."

"I'm not." Orion treated him to a smile and tilted his head toward Hot Rod. "Thank you for the assistant, by the way. Though I'm not sure I'll need one."

"Assistant?" Megatron echoed.

Hot Rod straightened from where he stood at Orion's side, peering over his shoulder at the parchment spread across Orion's desk. "You told Soundwave to reassign me, sir," he said, his tone perfunctory and polite. "This is it."

Oh, but he and Soundwave would have words later. A warning would have been nice.

"I see," Megatron said.

"Did you have something you wanted to ask me?" Orion asked, attracting Megatron's attention once more. He was all but glowing this morning, happiness radiating from him in nearly visible ways.

Megatron shook his head. "Nothing that can't wait." He managed a smile for his dearest friend, and

couldn't stop himself from slanting a look at Hot Rod.

The pretty smol ignored him. His attention returned to the parchments on the desk as though they were the most fascinating item in the aerie.

"I'll leave you to your work," Megatron continued as he backed toward the door.

"Are you sure?" The smallest of frowns curved Orion's lips. He looked concerned now, brow drawing downward, and that just wouldn't do.

Megatron forced his smile into something reassuring. "Yes. I am. Hot Rod, good luck."

"Thank you, my liege." Hot Rod dipped his head into a small nod. "Hopefully, this will better suit." His words were polite, but something in them cut like the sharp slash of an angry talon.

Megatron concealed his wince and made his escape. Emotion boiled up inside him, a mixture of shock and outrage and guilt. He must have really hurt Hot Rod, judging by the smol's behavior. Hot Rod hadn't spared so much as a smile for Megatron.

Spinning on a tarsal, Megatron headed for Soundwave's office. This early in the morning, it was the best place to find his Speaker, if Soundwave wasn't on one of his many self-assigned tasks. They needed to have a chat, it seemed.

No such luck, however. The door was pulled back. The desk was neat and tidy. There was not feather nor talon of Soundwave inside. Not even a sibling lurked in the sun-dappled shadows.

There was no point in wandering around looking for Soundwave. Megatron was better off attending to his own duties and checking back for Soundwave later.

Perhaps he ought to check in on Starscream.

Megatron climbed to the levels reserved for residences. Most of the nests were located here, though a few were also sporadically placed around the aerie. Like Perceptor and Drift, who were as near to the canopy as one could get without being above cover. While Maximus and Rung resided on the lowest floor, with the former preferring solid ground beneath his feet.

Starscream had chosen a nest somewhere around here. Though Megatron would check with Perceptor next if he couldn't find the newest addition to his flock. He also reminded himself to see what Soundwave had learned, if anything, and what he would share. Megatron's flock was allowed its secrets, but Soundwave still knew all.

The door to Starscream's nest was pinned open, and he'd even hung a charming little sign above the top of it, his name carefully inked on a sanded board. Drift's work, if Megatron could hazard a guess. Megatron rapped his knuckles on the thick knot of wood framing Starscream's door, remembering well how Starscream had shied away from even the most casual of touches.

"Starscream?"

"Come in!"

Permission granted, Megatron ducked inside, only needing to stoop a little to accommodate his larger height. Not all nests were built the same, after all.

Starscream had opted for the large nest-berth in the center, with the rest of the nest arranged concentrically around it. Megatron spotted a desk, a washbasin, a book shelf, and a small dresser built into the woven branches. Starscream's nest was also near to the thick trunk of the massive tree that held their home. The curtain to his balcony was wide open, letting in a nice breeze.

"My liege!" Starscream blinked in surprise as he turned away from his bookcase with an armful of small books – obviously human-made. "Is something wrong?"

Megatron, well aware of Starscream's personal space issues, elected to linger near the door. He didn't want to intrude any more than was necessary. "No. I merely wanted to check on you. Make sure you were getting settled and that there were no problems."

"Oh." Starscream adjusted his grip on the books. "Well, uh, I'm fine. I like it here. Everyone's pretty helpful, and it's nice to have my own space."

Megatron nodded. "That's good to hear. So no issues?"

"None at all." Starscream moved to his desk, dumping the books onto it with audible thumps. "I help Perceptor with his research when I can. I've looked in on Drift's training sessions. But I do spend a lot of time at the university." He paused and gave Megatron a nervous look. "That's okay, isn't it?"

Megatron fought back a chuckle. "Yes. As I said before, we don't restrict contact with the humans, but for your own safety, we do like to know when you leave and return, so we know if we should be concerned or not." He leaned against the door frame. "We are friendly with the university humans, but because of that, others know that the harpies here are... acclimated to humans. There have been incidents."

Starscream nibbled on his bottom lip. "Incidents?"

"Thieves and the like. Attempts to abduct harpies outside the aerie. It's why we are so insistent on security and guards for the Gathering," Megatron explained and while it pained him to see Starscream flinch, he hoped that it helped the smol understand how important it was.

Megatron had few rules for his flock. Every last one of them were designed for the safety and comfort of everyone. He wouldn't deny Starscream the opportunity to pursue his dreams, and any member of his flock was free to leave at any time. All Megatron needed to know was whether or not someone could be considered missing.

Starscream's throat bobbed. "I see." He rested one hand on his books, and Megatron hated to see the small tremble in them. "Then it is reasonable to keep one informed of my plans. I'll always tell Perceptor when I leave and when I expect to return."

"Thank you." Megatron smiled at his newest member. "And for what it's worth, I'm glad you are taking an interest in our human allies. Any bonds formed between us will be beneficial to both in the end."

Starscream arched an eyebrow. "Playing political games, my liege. I didn't take you for the sort."

"Because I come across as an uncouth barbarian?" Despite himself, Megatron grinned. If Starscream could joke, then he was getting more comfortable in Megatron's presence.

Starscream chuckled as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Only at first glance. I'd apologize, but you know it's true. As honorable as you are, you don't give off the air of one who's built his wealth off the misfortunes of others."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Oh, do." Starscream's lip curled in a fang-bearing smirk. "Now, Orion. He has something of a regal air about him. If I had to guess, I'd say I know why Crystal City is missing their eldest primeling."

A sharp one, wasn't he?

"Well, if that were true, it wouldn't be my story to tell, now would it?" Megatron cocked his head in what he hoped was teasing and not challenging.

Starscream laughed and it sounded genuine. Comfortable. Not at all anxious. "No, it wouldn't," he mused. "So you've surrounded yourself by harpies of a higher persuasion, but I'd gather there's not a political bone in your body."

"Not at all, you assume correctly." Megatron raised his feathery brows. "And you?"

Starscream flicked a hand through the air. "Not so much as a drop, thank Adaptus. I don't know which is more suffocating: the mating my parents tried to force upon me, or the life of caged glitz and glamor."

Ah, so Starscream was another who'd come to Kaon escaping a forced mating. He'd arrived not long after mating season as well, which meant he must have fled Vos either immediately prior to the beginning of it, or in the midst of it. Which did not paint a pretty picture in the back of Megatron's mind.

He was not so dense as not to know what happened during mating seasons with those who were force-coupled.

"I suppose that depends on your point of view," Megatron replied, careful with his words. He never wanted to downplay anyone's prior experiences. "And you will find that many of the harpies in this flock have fled circumstances similar to your own and Orion's. I accept any and all kinds and no one harpy is better than the other, bara or smol."

"I know." Starscream's smile softened into something genuine. "It was rumors of the acceptance I might find here that kept me going as I fled Vos."

Megatron's core clenched. Both Liege instinct and bara instinct wrangled with sympathy. The urge to protect his flock was consuming, and Megatron had already claimed Starscream as one of his. Like so many others, Megatron wished he could find whoever had caused that dark shadow in Starscream's eyes and rip their core from their body.

Sometimes, Megatron wondered who truly was the greater evil to the harpies: their own rules and conventions, or the humans.

"You are also welcome to your secrets," Megatron added, to assuage any possible fear Starscream might carry. "You're under no obligation to divulge your prior circumstances to anyone here. Soundwave probably already knows but--"

Starscream waved a hand. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned so far, it’s that Soundwave knows all.” He chuckled. “I’m fine with that since he seems capable of holding a secret, though I appreciate the discretion.”

“It is what we do. Though it seems discretion might be pointless in some cases.” Megatron straightened, rolling his shoulders to ease a kink in them. “You’re an observant individual.”

Starscream shrugged. “You have to watch if you want to learn anything. You need to see people to understand them.” He paused and tilted his head. “That pretty smol, by the way. He’s a royal, too. I’d stake my core on it.”

“I’ve many a pretty smol in my flock, you’ll have to be more specific,” Megatron said with a laugh. Though he suspected Starscream was talking about Tracks, who came from a rather prestigious family back in Crystal City.

Starscream tapped his chin. “Hot Rod, of course. Who else?” His lips pulled into a broad grin. “That smol has definitely had some kind of diplomatic experience.”

Megatron blinked. He scrunched his forehead. He tried not to laugh as the urge bubbled inside of him.

“Hot Rod,” he repeated, his tone carefully flat. “The most flamboyant smol in my flock, and you think he’s a royal? Perhaps your observations aren’t as keen as you think they are.”

“Or maybe you’re not as attentive as you think you are,” Starscream retorted, only to flinch and amend with a dip of his head, “my liege.”

Megatron fought back a sigh. “I’m not going to punish you for speaking your mind, Starscream. You’re allowed to do that here.” Well, within reason. He still didn’t care for Ratchet’s occasionally belligerent and challenging tones.

“Old habits die hard,” Starscream replied. One taloned foot dug into the ground, a tension in his stance.

“That I understand.” Megatron straightened and stepped fully back into the doorframe. “I do think you’re mistaken about Hot Rod, however.”

Starscream’s lips curled. “Well, I suppose time will tell. You’re courting him, aren’t you?”

“No.”

Starscream cocked his head. “You’re sure about that?”

“Is that another one of your observations?” Megatron half-expected to feel annoyed, but there was something about the quiet challenge in Starscream’s statements that he approved of. He hoped Starscream held onto this spark, and let it build into a blaze.

A low chuckle emerged from Starscream’s throat. Some of the tension in his feathers eased away. “Not only mine, my liege. You have the entire flock wondering why you haven’t taken that pretty one to nest yet.”

Megatron snorted. “A bunch of nosy tweets is what they are. Clearly, everyone is too bored.” He

tapped his chin with a foretalon. "Maybe I need to think of more chores."

Starscream laughed, genuine and loud. "I think they call that an abuse of power, your lordship."

Starscream teasing him was perhaps Megatron's gift for the day. Proof that the smol had grown a little comfortable in Megatron's presence.

"Sometimes, sacrifices must be made," Megatron replied with a smirk. He swept down into a low bow. "But I will leave you to your books. As always, feel free to come to me if you have any problems. My door is always open."

"I'll keep that in mind." Starscream swept down into his desk, already reaching for one of the books. "Thank you, my liege."

Megatron dipped his head again and excused himself, a lighter feeling in his chest. He made his way back to the main walkway, internally debating his next course of action. He started downward. He still needed to locate Soundwave.

"Megatron!"

He turned to see Trailbreaker striding toward him, a smile on the large bara's face. "Soundwave said you wanted to see me?" He sounded a little out of breath, as though he'd just come back from a flight or from escorting the Gathering team.

Megatron sighed inwardly. He would definitely be having words with Soundwave later.

"Yes, I did." Megatron gestured for Trailbreaker to join him and the bara fell into step beside him, his arms hanging at his sides. "You're not busy, are you?"

Trailbreaker shook his head, the glossy black of his feathers catching the sunlight and making them seem more colorful. "No, I just got back from escort duty. I thought I might peek in on today's training session later."

"Good choice." Megatron smiled and clasped his hands behind his back. How to apologize when Trailbreaker didn't even know he should be offended? "You've been here, what, five years?"

"Almost six!" Trailbreaker's grin brightened even further. He scrubbed the back of his neck. "Thanks again, for taking me in and all. I know you didn't have to. But it's nice, you know, to feel like I actually belong somewhere."

Trailbreaker was from a small clan on the outskirts of Uraya. The flock was very insular, as far as Megatron knew, and Trailbreaker had to sneak his way to freedom. Soundwave knew more details, of course, but Trailbreaker hadn't been outwardly forthcoming.

Megatron nodded. "Then you're happy here?"

Trailbreaker's smile could have lit the central atrium for a week. "Yes, sir!" he said, and his feathers ruffled. "Sometimes, it's a little overwhelming being able to choose, but I wouldn't trade it for anything."

A relief.

Megatron tilted his head. “And what about romance? Is there anyone here you’ve considered courting?”

Trailbreaker flushed. He ducked his head as though to make himself smaller, rubbing the back of his neck again. “Actually, um, there’s this smol in Nyon. He works the supply depot we trade with and uh....” He trailed off, the flush deepening, making his brown eyes darken in hue.

“Oh, I see.”

Nyon was one of the few aeries willing to trade with Megatron’s unusual flock of outcasts. They might disapprove in general of how Megatron’s flock was managed, but they liked what Kaon had to offer too much to turn them away. Megatron had welcomed a couple of harpies from Nyon, not because they were unhappy at home, but because they were curious.

Both harpies had chosen to stay. Both had mated within Kaon, though they visited home regularly, and that further improved relations between the two flocks.

“Yeah.” Trailbreaker coughed into his fist and tangled his talons together. “He’s nice and I make him laugh. Or at least I think I do. I’m still working on the courage to see if he’d go for a flight with me.”

Megatron’s smile was soft and genuine. “Who wouldn’t, Trailbreaker? You’d make someone a very wonderful mate. They’d be a lucky harpy.”

Trailbreaker’s blush deepened. “Thank you, sir.” He looked at Megatron a bit nervously. “It’s nice to be able to choose, you know? Back in Ultris, there wasn’t a lot of that. I couldn’t pick anything. Not my role in the flock. Not my friends. Not my mate. Couldn’t even pick what I wanted to eat.”

Guilt welled up in Megatron’s throat. “Not many choices then.”

“None at all.” Trailbreaker exhaled softly and tilted his head back, looking up at the canopy. “But it’s different here. I don’t know if I can ever thank you enough for letting me live here.”

Megatron shook his head and drew to a stop. They’d walked all the way to the ground floor as they talked. “You have nothing to thank me for. This is the freedom you should have always had.”

“Most leaders don’t actually think that, you know?” Trailbreaker chuckled. “But I’m glad that you do. Thanks, sir.”

Megatron dipped his head. “You’re welcome.”

“Was there anything else or...?”

An apology would seem odd at this point, wouldn’t it? Trailbreaker had no idea the offense Megatron had committed. And given Trailbreaker’s temperament, he’d be forgiving Megatron before he’d managed to get the full apology out. No, best to make his amends with the one he’d truly offended.

“No, I just like to check in with my flock from time to time.” Megatron clapped Trailbreaker on the shoulder, and the large bara all but puffed with pride at the gesture. “Though if you could point me in Soundwave’s direction, that would be enormously helpful.”

Trailbreaker laughed aloud. “He’s good at hiding, isn’t he, sir?”

“Especially when he doesn’t want to be found.”

Trailbreaker laughed again. “Well, when I last saw him, he was heading to the kitchens, probably for a late breakfast.”

Knowing Soundwave, that was likely. He tended to put others before himself: his siblings first and foremost, and often Megatron as well. Megatron often wondered if Soundwave had ever eaten a hot meal in his entire life. Or even a complete meal at that, one where he didn’t share bits and bites with one of his siblings.

“I’ll catch him there then. Thank you, Trailbreaker.” Megatron tipped his head in a little bow. “As you were.”

Trailbreaker sketched a loose approximation of a salute at him and jogged off, his short, yet broad tail bobbing behind him. He really would make some lucky harpy a fine mate. Megatron sincerely hoped this smol in Ultris returned Trailbreaker’s affections. He deserved to be happy.

All of Megatron’s flock deserved it, to be fair.

Megatron turned and headed back to the ramp, ascending it to the second level, and nodding in greeting to the others he passed. It was mid-morning by now. Clean up from breakfast would be finished, and the lunch preparers wouldn’t be in for another hour yet, though they were probably off somewhere, squabbling over what to serve.

Whirl would win. He always did.

Megatron ducked into the large common room, which was still and quiet. He passed by the massive table with benches enough to seat every harpy in his flock, and slipped into the adjoining preparation room. This was where he found Soundwave, perched at the island table in the middle, Frenzy sitting next to him, his feet dangling in mid-air as the stool was far too tall.

“Morning, boss!” Frenzy said cheerfully, around a mouthful of melon, flecks of which burst out of his mouth as he chewed with his mouth open.

“Good morning, Frenzy. I thought you didn’t like melon,” Megatron said as he moved to take a seat across from Soundwave, fixing his Speaker with a look. He folded his hands on the counter, watching Soundwave carefully spoon rolled oats and honey into his mouth.

Only here, in the privacy of the empty preparation room, did Soundwave feel comfortable eating without his mask. He’d set it aside, and there was nothing to hide the scars around his neck, the raw patches where feathers had been torn free and never grew back. Marks of a chain, human-made.

They never failed to make a ripple of anger surge through Megatron. If it weren’t for the fact most of the humans responsible were dead, he’d never manage to swallow it down.

“It’s grown on me!” Frenzy chirped and noisily bit into another section of melon, spraying juice in all directions.

“Tastes change,” Soundwave rasped, his voice sounding rougher today, and worse than it had this morning. “Manners, Frenzy.”

“Awww.” Frenzy kicked his legs, but the next bite was far more delicate. “You take the fun outta everythin’.”

Soundwave ignored him, his pale, pale eyes lifting to Megatron. “Trailbreaker find you?”

“Yes, you meddlesome little spy, he did.” Megatron braced his elbows on the edge of the table. “And point taken.”

Soundwave’s lips curled into a small smile. He spooned another bite of oats into his mouth.

“It’s not the only thing you’ve meddled in today,” Megatron continued conversationally. He reached for the bowl of fruit in the middle, spearing a peach with his talon. “You did that on purpose.”

Frenzy snickered into his melon, his eyes sparkling with humor.

Soundwave, however, was entirely bland. “Specifics necessary, Liege.”

“Stop. You know you don’t have to say that.” Not in general, but Soundwave wouldn’t relent on that, so Megatron at least got him to agree to not using the title in private.

Soundwave spooned in another mouthful of oats. The spoon made a scraping noise as he bumped it against his teeth.

Megatron sighed and fiddled with the peach, rolling it between his fingers. “I told you to reassign Hot Rod, and you put him with Orion. If that wasn’t deliberate, I’ll eat this peach pit.”

Frenzy scrubbed the back of his hand over his mouth, smearing melon juice everywhere. “I hear they’re tasty roasted over an open fire.”

Soundwave rested the spoon in the bowl. “Hot Rod’s experience is acceptable, and his comprehension of multiple languages makes him ideal for Orion’s assistant.”

Megatron’s eyes narrowed. This was all news to him. He hadn’t even known Hot Rod spoke anything other than their common tongue. “And yet he was first assigned to the Cradle.”

“Orion didn’t need an assistant then. The Cradle did.”

Megatron twitched. “You’re playing semantics with me.”

“Reassignment requested?” Soundwave asked as he picked up the spoon again, stirring it through the rolled oats.

Frenzy’s massive grin was hidden only by the curve of melon pressed between his lips. His eyes bounced back and forth between his brother and Megatron as though it were an interesting battle. And perhaps it was.

Megatron thumbed the peach. “Do you think I don’t know how devious you are, by now?”

Frenzy erupted into a giggle. “Boss, there ain’t nowhere bro can put hot stuff where you won’t see him.”

Megatron reared back. “That’s not--”

“Lie.” A single word, clipped and pointed, before Soundwave spooned oats into his mouth with a deliberate motion.

“His happiness is my primary concern,” Megatron corrected through gritted teeth.

Frenzy dropped the empty melon rind to the table. “Hah. If that were true, then you’d have rutted him already.”

“Frenzy.”

The small harpy’s smirk was utterly unrepentant. “Got it, bro. Being quiet now.”

If he actually succeeded, it would be a miracle. Frenzy snatched a handful of candied pecans out of the bowl near Soundwave’s hand and shoved them into his mouth.

Soundwave rested his spoon in the now empty bowl, affixing Megatron with a level look, his pale eyes unerringly finding Megatron. “You will temper yourself, my liege.”

The use of the honorific was purposeful this time. Megatron knew Soundwave well enough to recognize that by now. He’d been rebuked.

His gaze lowered. “I will apologize, yes.”

Soundwave nodded and reached across the table, fingers searching the fruit bowl before selecting a plum and removing it. “Someday, you will realize that few secrets are worth the price paid.”

Megatron snorted and bit into his peach, the juices immediately soaking his mouth. “That’ll be the day you realize being cryptic is utterly useless.” He spoke with his mouth full. But he could do that.

Soundwave’s lips curved into a slight smile of amusement.

Frenzy loudly crunched on his candied pecans, wriggling in his chair. He looked as though he might burst if he couldn’t speak, but he still obeyed his eldest brother. Or adopted brother, rather.

In truth, only Ravage was biologically related to Soundwave. He’d adopted Frenzy and Rumble from a couple who believed far too much in the superstitions about twins. He’d rescued Laserbeak and Buzzsaw from the same humans who’d scarred him. If anyone were to ask, however, Soundwave would always reply, without a hitch, ‘they are my brothers’.

To him, their actual blood didn’t matter. They were his brothers, his siblings, the beat of his core. He would die to protect each and every one of them.

Megatron slipped off his stool. “Then I leave you to it. Assign Hot Rod wherever you think is best. I won’t interfere again.”

Soundwave carefully licked at the plum, eating without mess unlike both Frenzy and Megatron. “Yes, my liege.”

“Bye, Boss!”

Frenzy’s cheerful waving followed Megatron out the door. He paused only long enough to drop the

cleaned peach pit in a gathering basket. They collected all of the stone fruit pits and crushed them for various recipes and art projects. Waste not, want not.

The sweetness of the peach lingered on Megatron's tongue. He allowed himself a moment to ponder what to do next before he trudged back to the ground floor and the mountain of paperwork no doubt waiting for him. It never ceased to amaze him how many documents a small flock could generate.

There was no helping it.

Megatron ducked into his office, though he left the door pinned open. He welcomed any and all distractions or interruptions so long as they would save him from this most onerous task.

He maneuvered behind his desk, sat heavily down in his stool, and glared at the neat assemblage of scrolls and thick paper. Thick-er, he should say. They'd quickly discovered that using the traditional paper stock of the university was a poor choice. It was too thin, too delicate, too easily punctured by sharp harpy talons. Now they used something a bit heavier. Card stock, he believed Professor Shin had called it.

Megatron closed his eyes, put his hand on the desk, and grabbed the first thing his fingers touched. Which, when he peeked, turned out to be a supply reconciliation list.

He'd only managed to select the single duller piece of paper on his desk. But of course.

Megatron sighed and got to work.

Some time later, which felt like days but couldn't have been more than two hours at best, Megatron had tallied all of the discrepancies. He frowned. The perfect number of discrepancies, of course, was zero. But here lately, that number had climbed from two to seven to fifteen.

Either the humans were shorting them on trades, or someone in Megatron's flock was stealing from the aerie. Both options were plausible. He'd had a problem with thieves before, but it was usually because he'd just accepted another wanderer from a flock with strict, near-abusive rules. Those wayward harpies would steal food and hide it, convinced they wouldn't be fed, for example.

That type of behavior was forgiven.

Megatron suspected that wasn't the case here. The missing supplies weren't for mere survival. There were solar batteries missing, for Adaptus' sake. As far as Megatron knew, his was the only flock with decent enough relations with humans to even use their technology.

Knuckles rapped on his doorframe. Megatron looked up, utterly relieved at the interruption, to find Hot Rod ducking into his office, his arms laden with documents.

Well, this wasn't awkward.

"Afternoon," Megatron greeted, deciding to aim for casual. He leaned back, pretending he hadn't been hunched over his desk like a fledgling being forced to learn arithmetic.

Hot Rod dipped his head deferentially. Of the sunny smile he usually wore, there was no sign. "Orion told me to bring these to you. He offered the armload of papers. "And also to tell you 'nice try.'" He frowned in confusion.

Megatron huffed a laugh and accepted the thick sheaf of documents. Foiled again. “Egg heavy, and I still can’t get anything past him,” he murmured.

Hot Rod blinked. “Beg your pardon?”

“Nothing.” Megatron shook his head and looked down at the papers, leafing through them quickly to remind himself what they were. “Thank you for bringing them.”

“Well, assisting Orion is my duty now.” Hot Rod dipped his head in a nod. He turned to go.

Megatron hesitated for all of a second before Soundwave’s chastisement echoed in the back of his mind. “Hot Rod.”

The beautiful smol turned back around, his face carefully neutral and his energy contained. He’d always bounced into Megatron’s presence before. He’d always had a smile, a tease, a flirt to offer. The sudden reverse course made the guilt settle in even deeper.

Megatron coughed to clear his throat. “Are you… happy assisting Orion?”

Hot Rod blinked. His hands disappeared as he clasped them behind his back. He bounced on the heels of his feet. “It’s a duty I’m suited for,” he said as though carefully choosing his words.

Damn.

Megatron had massively erred.

He leaned forward, bracing his arms on the desk. “That is not what I asked. Does it make you happy?”

Hot Rod tilted his head. “I’m not sure what answer you want, my liege.”

“The truth would suffice,” Megatron said with a sigh and rubbed at his forehead. “This is my fault, and I apologize. My Speaker has seen fit to inform me that I’ve overstepped, and right now, I’m seeing how right he is.”

Feathers whispered together as Hot Rod shifted his weight. “I enjoy working with Orion.”

“And you enjoyed your shifts in the Cradle, too?” Megatron asked as he peered up at the flame-colored smol, who’s expression gradually shifted from confusing to understanding.

Hot Rod nodded and bounced again, a smile finally gracing his lips. “Yes, sir. Honestly, I’ll go wherever you assign me, but it’s just…” He paused and nibbled on his bottom lip, uncertainty bleeding in his body language.

Megatron gestured for him to continue. “Go on. I’m not angry at you, I promise. My ire is solely directed inward.” At himself, for being such a controlling fool. He treated no other harpy in his flock like this. Why did he assume he knew what was best for Hot Rod as well?

Hot Rod’s feathers fluttered. “I like doing a lot of things,” he mumbled quietly and his gaze fell, color staining his cheeks a pretty pink. “I just don’t, you know, want to be told I can’t do it.”

Fair enough.

Megatron stood, slowly however, he didn't wish to alarm Hot Rod. "I apologize," he said, and oh how it burned. He hated admitting when he was wrong.

His only consolation was that it came as a fair surprise. Hot Rod's eyes were big and wide, bright blue and lovely. His jaw dropped just a little, freeing the bottom lip which he'd gnawed in his anxiety, making it pink and swollen.

Megatron wanted to kiss him.

"There are times I forget what it means to be Liege and what an honor that brings me," Megatron continued, his tone shifting to gruff, if only to hide the way his core burned at the thought of bringing Hot Rod to his nest. "You are, of course, free to choose whichever duty you like best. Let Soundwave know your preferences, and he'll adjust the schedules accordingly."

Hot Rod's feathers fluttered. "Really?" He sounded almost breathless, as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Megatron swallowed thickly and sat back down, mindlessly shuffling through the papers on his desk. "Yes. My only wish is for those I lead to be happy. Included in that is letting them decide their own fate."

"I... thank you, my liege." Hot Rod broke off from what seemed to be the start of an excited babble, and shifted into a more mature tone. He dipped his head in a low nod. "I promise that no matter what I choose, I will give my all to it."

"I'm already certain you will." Megatron inhaled quietly and steeled himself, folding one hand over the other. "There is one other apology I owe you."

Hot Rod blinked. "Oh?"

Heat stole into Megatron's face, and he wished he could blame the inappropriate thoughts of kissing Hot Rod. "It was wrong of me to try and foist your attention onto another. Not only was it rude to you and your feelings, but an insult to Trailbreaker as well, who I was recently reminded came to us from a flock that arranged matings." Shame was bitter and thick on his tongue.

"It's okay," Hot Rod said, though his voice was soft, and his eyes were everywhere but on Megatron.

He shook his head. "No, it's not--"

"Yes, it is." Hot Rod inhaled loud enough for Megatron to hear it, as though gathering his courage. "I guess it's a truth I didn't want to hear." His crest feathers went limp, laying flat against his head. "Maybe it was the cruel thing to do, but it was effective."

Ouch. Megatron flinched, though he doubted that had been Hot Rod's intention.

Hot Rod's lip curled into a smile, thin and cracked though it was. He bowed again, more shallow this time, and backstepped toward the door. "I understand now," he said and spread his hands, the long feathers sweeping across the floor. "And you can rest assured that I will never be a bother to you again."

Megatron winced. “That’s not what I considered you.”

“You did,” Hot Rod said, and his smile was hurt now. He lingered in the doorway, as though he couldn’t wait to escape. “And that’s on me. For being an idiot. So I accept your apology, though I deserved it, and uh, yeah. We’re fine. Everything’s fine. You can lead in peace, and I can... turn my sights elsewhere.”

He paused, nose twitching. “Not on Trailbreaker though. He’s sweet and charming, but I’m pretty sure he’s been giving Skybright over in Nyon the dopiest looks lately.”

“Well, I’m relieved you’re pursuing your own happiness,” Megatron replied and deftly ignored the disappointment ringing through his core. “And I’m sure by now Orion is missing you.”

Hot Rod chuckled. “Yeah. Probably.” He paused, his gaze on Megatron lingering as though he intended to say something else before deciding against it. “See you at dinner,” he said, and then he was gone, leaving Megatron alone with his paperwork, including the stack Orion had returned to him.

Megatron sat back and waited for the feeling of relief to wash over him. He waited and he waited, unhappy with the unease that settled within him instead. As if he’d not only ignored an opportunity, but threw it in the trash.

Megatron buried his face behind his hand and tossed his quill onto the desk. Sometimes, the hardest thing about being Liege was accepting the kind of life it gave him and the hard choices he had to make.

Chapter 5

Hot Rod, at least, had been partially right.

While Megatron had showed himself to be cruel, his words had their intended effect. No more did the beautiful smol linger outside of Megatron's nest with a flirty smile. Nor did he invite Megatron out for a flight or a meal. He didn't saunter toward Megatron in the bathing springs, dripping with water, his freshly washed feathers glinting. He didn't offer to help Megatron clean his scapulae. He didn't display.

Hot Rod was cordial, but distant. He didn't interact with Megatron any more than was necessary, though that meant daily. He was still, after all, Orion's assistant, and the more gravid Orion became, the more he needed to send Hot Rod out to run errands for him and the more he served as go-between for Orion and Megatron.

If he had set his eyes on another in the flock, most likely a bara given Hot Rod's temperament, Megatron didn't know. Neither did he ask Soundwave. It was none of his business, so long as Hot Rod was happy and he appeared to be so.

A month passed. Orion grew heavier with egg, still not visible, but the draw on his body meant he tired easily. Storing energy, perhaps, for the much more exciting second month, where Megatron was sure he wouldn't be able to pry Shockwave and Orion out of their nest for the better part of two weeks.

He was so looking forward to that time. He would be working with Hot Rod a lot more closely then. Hot Rod who had not only done well as Orion's assistant, he'd accepted the offer to train as the harpy to take over for Orion whilst Orion was too busy with a new fledge.

It was for the best. Megatron was glad Hot Rod had finally been able to move on, that he was seeking out a place for himself in the aerie and the flock, one that wouldn't include a berth in Megatron's nest.

Any disappointment on Megatron's part was swallowed as soon as it bubbled into view. He'd had his chance. He refused to take it. He wouldn't admit he missed it now, how present Hot Rod had been in his life, how seeing the smol's smile had so often lifted his spirits.

To distract himself, Megatron doubled-down on the amount of time he spent doing his work. He caught up the documents. He spent more time with each of his harpies individually. He got more involved in every aspect of his flock.

He joined Drift's training sessions as a practice mate for those in training. He offered himself as a second pair of hands for Perceptor. He helped with inventory counting, and started to learn how to prepare some very basic things in the kitchen. Speaking with Trailbreaker had been enlightening, so Megatron made it a point to seek out every last one of his flock.

Are you happy here? Is there anything I can do for you?

He didn't want to be the kind of leader his harpies fled from. He wanted to be the kind who cared, and to do that, he had to care about his flock as individuals. Kaon was small enough now that it was feasible. He knew every one of his flock by face and name. He wanted to know them by more than

that.

Megatron made an effort to be familiar with every task in his Aerie. Everything that needed doing or was being done. Every project, every survival need, every little thing, from the maintenance of the canopy weave to the cleaning of the springs.

Even Gathering.

It was a task vital to the survival of the flock. Yes, they traded for a lot of the more exotic fruits, vegetables, and nuts. The humans at Kaon University were always willing to hand over their extra crops or trade crops for information or harpy crafts. But gathering food from the wilds was equally important. Their own little garden was still a work in progress, but getting larger with each growing season.

Gatherers were usually the harpies in Megatron's flock with the quickest speeds and the keenest vision. Able to get away in a hurry if necessary, and able to spot the ripest or near-ripest of edible things. They had no trouble digging for the tubers and shrooms hidden in the foliage, and didn't mind the often far distances that needed to be traveled.

Megatron spent little time as a Gatherer. He had, however, served as a guard on several occasions. Worries about dangerous humans were ever present, and when one of his warriors was sick or otherwise occupied, Megatron was more than happy to fill in the gap. He would not lose a Gatherer to a lucky human.

Megatron had never lost one of his flock to the humans. Adaptus willing, he never would.

Today's Gathering group wasn't short in the escort, but Megatron flew out to it anyway. A little extra protection couldn't hurt, and it was such a lovely day, warm and breezy, the air strong with the scent of honeysuckle and the sky an endless spill of blue without a cloud in sight.

Megatron caught an updraft and used the burst to carry him to the south field, where the Gatherers had found a nice cluster of blackberry bramble, a much beloved sweet treat in Megatron's flock. Especially if Drift could be persuaded to turn it into jam.

He looked down, counting heads. There should be four Gatherers and two escorts. He spotted Trailbreaker and Bulkhead escorting, and among the Gatherers were Ravage, away from Soundwave for once, and Needlenose. Horribull was there, too, never far from Needlenose.

Wait. That was only three.

Megatron frowned and hovered, flapping to keep himself aloft. Where was the fourth? Who was the fourth? Megatron didn't receive a daily roll call of who was going to be on what tasks.

He made a mental note to start having Soundwave put together something like that for him. Just because of moments like this.

Megatron dipped a little lower, eyes frantically searching the ground for the fourth harpy. He'd land in a moment, inform Trailbreaker and Bulkhead of their missing Gatherer, but if he could locate the harpy first, that would be a relief.

He caught a bright flash from the corner of his eye. Megatron banked to the left, heading toward another crop of blackberry bushes just over a rise in the land and behind a small stand of trees. The

flash was far too big to be a small bird.

He was right.

Megatron swooped in lower just as the bright flash got larger and brighter and coalesced into none other than Hot Rod, a look of frustration on his face as he struggled to disentangle himself from some briar vines. They had a grip on the long length of his feathers, and the more he struggled, the harder the thorns dug in.

Amusement warred with aggravation. Megatron wiped both from his face as he tilted in for a landing and approached the caught smol.

“I didn’t know you were a Gatherer,” he said by way of greeting.

Hot Rod’s gaze whipped up toward him, embarrassment burning bright across the bridge of his cheeks. “Well, uh, you know how it is,” he said with a little nervous laugh. “See a need, fill a need. I go wherever an extra pair of hands are needed.”

“I thank you for your dedication,” Megatron said. He arched an eyebrow as he took in the basket at Hot Rod’s feet, almost tilted over and full of blackberries. “Having some trouble, are you?”

Bushes rustled as Hot Rod twitched. He concealed a wince. “I do appear to be caught in the brambles.” He grinned, though it was a little lopsided. “Um. Help?”

Megatron chuckled. “Gladly.”

He moved closer, albeit carefully. He’d already caught the worst of the issue. There was a brambled vine wrapped around Hot Rod’s left arm and wing, preventing him from moving. Easy enough to get out of with assistance, not so much on his own unless he was willing to sacrifice quite a few feathers.

Megatron got to work, aware that he now had to stand uncomfortably close to Hot Rod in order to do so, the sweet aroma of the summer blackberries mixing with Hot Rod’s own natural scent. His core gave a hard throb in his chest, one that echoed much lower, to his groin, which had seen only the touch of his own hand for far too long.

“You do realize you’ve separated from the group,” Megatron said. Conversation, he hoped, would be a sorely needed distraction.

“Those bushes were getting stripped clean!” Hot Rod held perfectly still, waiting for Megatron to work the longer thorns loose. “And Drift promised he’d make me some jam if I brought him the biggest ones.”

“Well, I suppose I can’t blame you for that then.” Megatron freed one of Hot Rod’s wings and had him tuck it against his chest. “Don’t move.”

Hot Rod sighed. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Is this your first time Gathering?”

“No.”

“Then you know the rules.”

“Rules.” Hot Rod repeated the word, dragging out the last syllable with the kind of aggrieved whine of a sub-adult. “I thought they were guidelines.”

Megatron gave Hot Rod a pointed look. “And if I’d not come around, you’d have been stuck here, with no one knowing where you were.”

“It’s not like I was far!”

“That’s not the point.”

Hot Rod huffed and looked away, the staining around his nose getting brighter. “If I’d known I was going to get a lecture with help, I’d have opted to stay stuck in the thorns.”

“I could still leave you here.”

Hot Rod pressed his lips together and said nothing. He also didn’t turn to look at Megatron again, something closed off in his expression.

Megatron swallowed down a sigh. This was a far cry from the days when Hot Rod was always so happy to see him. When he had a smile for Megatron. This right here was just a reminder of what Megatron had refused.

Sweet and beautiful, charming and bright. Determined and energetic. Not royal like Starscream assumed, but still a good harpy. He’d make someone a wonderful mate.

Megatron untangled the last of the thorns and held the bramble away with the tips of his talons. “You’re free.”

Hot Rod darted past him as though afraid he’d get stuck again if he lingered. He heaved a huge sigh of relief, lifting his arms and examining his wings. He loosed a cry of alarm when he spotted a small bald patch where the brambles had managed to snatch a prize.

“Ratchet’s gonna kill me,” he muttered with such a forlorn tone that Megatron almost laughed.

Ratchet did not suffer fools, and it was certainly foolish to get oneself caught in the blackberry thorns.

Megatron scooped up the blackberry basket, plucking out one of the larger ones and tossing it into his mouth. The sweet-tart juice splashed over his tongue. Oh, these were perfectly ripe. Perfect for jam, perfect for pie, perfect for crumble.

“You could take it as a lesson in obeying those ‘guidelines’,” Megatron said as he ate another blackberry.

Hot Rod gave him a look and held out a hand. “Could I have my basket back, sir?”

“I don’t get a thank you?”

Hot Rod twitched. His lips pressed together into a thin line as though he were holding back his words. “Thank you,” he finally said, and his shoulders sank a little. “I’ll try not to stray so far from

the group next time.”

“It’s only because I care for your safety, Hot Rod.” Megatron handed the basket over, and Hot Rod tucked it back onto the hook around his waist. “The rules are there to protect everyone in the flock, not inhibit them.”

Hot Rod smiled, but it was thin and sad. “Everyone, huh? Because no one individual – bara or smol – is more important to you than any other.”

Megatron clenched his jaw. “I am Liege.” He kept his tone soft, gentle. He didn’t want this to sound chiding. “I cannot hold any in higher regard. I should always be fair.”

“You’re only mortal, Megatron,” Hot Rod said quietly, his tone at jarring odds with the usually chipper voice Megatron had gotten used to. “No matter how hard you try, your core will always hold someone dear. Not even a liege is above that trap.”

“Trap,” Megatron echoed and tilted his head. “You think loving someone is a cage?”

Hot Rod chuckled, and there was no humor in it. “I suppose that depends on who built the bars.”

“Hot Rod!”

The sound of someone shouting for Hot Rod struck through their conversation with all the subtlety of a lightning bolt. Megatron looked past Hot Rod to see Bulkhead charging over the hill into view, somewhat out of breath, a wild look in his amber eyes.

“Adaptus be praised! There you are!” Bulkhead said with an audible exhale of relief. “We’ve been looking for you for ten minutes! We’d thought the worse until--” His eyes skipped past Hot Rod and landed on Megatron. “Sir!” His eyes went wide. Panicked.

“It’s okay, Bulkhead,” Megatron said with a dip of his head. “I happened to be passing by when I saw Hot Rod separated from the group. I was just about to shoo him back your direction.”

Relief echoed in the flutter of Bulkhead’s olive-green feathers. He was one of the volunteer guards, a large bara with a barrel chest and a sturdy body. He was the best and fiercest brawler in the guard.

“I’m sorry, sir. We should have been more vigilant,” Bulkhead said with a dip of his head. Though his eyes slanted toward Hot Rod in something like annoyance. “We didn’t even realize he’d gone until Ravage pointed it out.”

Megatron waved off the apology. “The rules are more guidelines anyway. Right, Hot Rod?”

Hot Rod ignored him. “I’m sorry, Bulkhead,” he said with a smile and genuine contrition in his face. He cuddled up to Bulkhead’s side. “I caught a whiff of these bushes and couldn’t resist how full they were. I’ll let you know next time. Promise.”

The irritation vanished. Bulkhead sighed and rubbed the back of his head. “You’re a handful, Roddy.”

“It’s part of my charm.” He grinned, tail feathers twitching with delight. “You’ll forgive me if I share the jam Drift’ll make me, right?”

“I think I can be persuaded.” Bulkhead grinned. He patted his belly. “Never let it be said that I turn down free sweet treats.”

Hot Rod laughed. Or giggled. Probably both. “They forgive anything.”

Bulkhead’s irritation must have passed to Megatron, because he suddenly found himself inexplicably annoyed.

“Well, since Hot Rod is safely found and extracted from the brambles, I’ll be on my way,” Megatron said, perhaps a touch too loudly. He took a step back.

Bulkhead startled as though Megatron had yelled. “Oh, right. Thank you, sir.” He bowed, lower than was necessary. “And sorry. I won’t lose a Gatherer again. You have my word on this.”

“It’s quite all right, Bulkhead. It’s not your fault.” Megatron offered the guard a reassuring smile. “Keep them safe, Bulkhead.”

“Of course, sir.”

Megatron lifted himself into the sky. Perhaps it was petty of him not to say farewell to Hot Rod. It was certainly rude, but there was a squirm in his belly right now, one Megatron couldn’t name.

He fought the urge to look back at Hot Rod and lost. The look the flame-colored smol sent him was a mixture of anger and hurt, before Megatron rose too high to see Hot Rod’s face clearly anymore.

The taste of blackberries lingered on Megatron’s tongue. It was still weaker than the scent of Hot Rod still caught in his nose and clinging to his feathers.

He was definitely going to get Soundwave to start a daily list of who would be Gathering just in case. And in the future, Megatron would be checking said list before joining the Gatherers on their task.

~

Getting himself more involved in every little corner of his aerie turned out to be a brilliant idea for a distraction. Megatron spent less time in his office, crouched over documents, and more time out with his flock.

He looked in on Orion from time to time, his core squeezing with complicated emotion. Pride. Happiness. Regret. The life within Orion grew, the flush of joy made Orion even more beautiful, and the happiness in the mated couple seemed to infect everyone around them. It was hard to be bitter in their presence.

It was hard to forget.

So when Drift came to him with a request, Megatron didn’t think twice about declining.

“I promise it’s only the one time,” Drift said, sounding rushed and apologetic and agitated all at once. His feathers were all afluff, his tailfeathers especially.

Megatron held up a hand, trying to calm his fencemaster. “Drift, it is quite all right. I am happy to help, on this occasion and any other.”

“It’s just, I’m the fencemaster, and this is my responsibility. I’m the one who confused my own schedule, I shouldn’t be getting others to fix my mistakes,” Drift bit out, and there were echoes of his past life in the words, in his hunched shoulders, in the recitation of a lecture he’d probably heard time and time before.

“Drift.” Megatron rested his hands on the smol’s shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “You’ve overextended your time. It’s hardly a mistake worthy of punishment. Don’t worry. I’ll handle the training session, and you concentrate on making sure your anniversary night with Perceptor is a success. Understand?”

Drift smiled, wobbly though it was, and some of the tension bled out of his body. He nodded. “Yes, sir. Thank you. And next time, I’ll make sure Cyclonus is free to help out so you don’t have to be bothered.”

“It’s no bother.” Megatron dropped his hands. Drift was calmer now, more willing to listen to reason. “Now, what time is the session?”

Drift winced again. “In fifteen minutes.”

Megatron swallowed a sigh. He didn’t want to send Drift into another frenzy of guilt and self-recrimination. “Then I’d best be on my way. Good luck tonight.”

“Thank you again, sir.” Drift bowed deeply, a behavior he’d brought with him from his birth Aerie as there was something theatrically formal about it. Megatron had given up on getting him to stop.

Sometimes, there was comfort in old traditions.

“You’re welcome. Now off you go.”

Drift smiled and excused himself, leaving Megatron to finally release the sigh he’d been holding. Fifteen minutes before he had to take over Drift’s training session. It was hardly enough time to prepare anything, much less himself, but he’d already committed to it.

He quickly climbed to one of the highest levels, where the training room and dojo had been built, taking up half the floor and anchored to the trunk for stability. The floor itself was a multi-layered construction of plaited branches interwoven and lain over thick logs banded together with hand-twined cord.

Building the training room had been one of Drift’s projects when they first picked this tree as home for the aerie and started constructing around the massive trunk. It had taken him the better part of two years, and Drift now maintained the structure almost religiously. It was his second pride and joy, beyond the ceiling he’d made for Perceptor.

Megatron arrived and frowned in confusion. The training room was deserted. Sure, he still had ten minutes but shouldn’t some of the attendees have arrived by now? Or perhaps Drift had given him the time the instructor was expected to arrive.

Sighing, Megatron walked a circuit around the room, ensuring he’d have everything he needed. All

of the equipment was present and accounted for, clean and ready for use. Not that he had expected otherwise. Drift was scrupulous in the care of everything associated with the dojo. Megatron browsed the practice blades and selected one that would be of use to him.

Footsteps announced the arrival of his first student.

Megatron turned to greet him, and it took all of his self-control not to falter at the sight of Hot Rod strolling into the training room. The pretty smol came to an abrupt halt as he saw Megatron and looked, of all things, like a rabbit in the talons of a hawk.

“Where’s Drift?” Hot Rod asked.

“Otherwise occupied,” Megatron said, hoping he sounded smooth and unbothered. “I will be instructing class tonight.”

Hot Rod blinked. “Class? It’s just me.” He frowned and eyed the sword in Megatron’s grip. “And I’m supposed to be learning hand-to-hand defensive techniques. You know, in case any of those humans you fear so much try to snatch me.”

Megatron stared at him and wondered if the same look of confusion on Hot Rod’s face was now on his own. “Oh. I see.” He turned and put the sword back into the slot. “Either way, I can handle Drift’s responsibilities in his absence.”

Hot Rod nibbled on his bottom lip. “It’s not that important. I can reschedule.” He spun on a tarsal strut back toward the doorway.

“Do you think me incapable or am I so frightening you can’t bear to learn from me?” Megatron crossed his arms in front of him and cocking an eyebrow.

Hot Rod paused and half-turned, his eyes narrowed. “Neither. But you and I both know, my liege, that you’d rather be anywhere so long as it isn’t near me.” His tail feathers twitched. “After all, haven’t I become something of a nuisance?”

Megatron exhaled to hide his flinch. “I deserved that,” he replied and gestured for Hot Rod to come further into the training room. “I can teach you just as well as Drift, and I did promise him I would be his substitute. Are you going to make me go back on my word?”

Hot Rod gnawed harder on his lip. Indecision flicked across his face before he sighed and came back inside. “Well, you’re our Liege. We can’t have anyone doubting your honor, can we?” He spread his hands, long flame-colored feathers rustling across the floor. “But don’t blame me if you regret it.”

“I think I’ll survive,” Megatron said dryly. He moved to the center of the large mat. “So. Drift was going to instruct you in defensive techniques. Has he had a chance to show you any yet?”

Hot Rod joined Megatron on the mat, though he stood more than an arm’s reach away. “No. This was supposed to be our first lesson.”

Megatron nodded and contemplated for a moment. There was a class most members of the Prime’s family and subfamily took back in Crystal City. Other versions of it were offered around the flock to the lower classes, and it was taken by smols mostly. Crystal City had restrictions, but none so badly as aeries like Vos or Tarn.

Sometimes, baras wouldn't take no for an answer. Sometimes, they needed a physical reminder of what that refusal met. Megatron had never taught one of these classes, but he'd observed quite a few of them. He'd watched Orion take one or three. Orion was a bara, yes, but he was also primeling, heir to the Primacy.

One could never be too careful.

"Uh, are you sure you want to do this?" Hot Rod asked.

Megatron blinked out of his reverie. "Yes." He gestured for Hot Rod to come closer. "I don't know what Drift had in mind, but for now, I thought I'd show you how to get out of some of the more common, unwanted holds."

"Unwanted holds," Hot Rod echoed as he inched within arm's reach. "That's going to require you touching me, isn't it?"

Megatron arched an eyebrow. "That is the definition of a hold, yes. I don't see anyone else here I can demonstrate the moves on." He made a point to look around. "Though if you'd prefer not to learn, I won't hold it against you."

Hot Rod sighed and inched closer once more. "I want to learn," he grumbled and flicked his hands into the air. "What first, my honorable liege?"

Megatron ground his teeth and tried to center himself. Hot Rod was needling him on purpose, and he needed to remember that. He'd hurt Hot Rod and offended him. Of course the smol would still be upset about that.

"A simple grab. Here. Hold out your hand."

Hot Rod stared at him, clearly hesitating, before he lifted one of his hands. "Be gentle," he joked.

Megatron fought the urge to roll his eyes. He closed his fingers around Hot Rod's wrist, gently to start. "The first likely unwanted contact will be a grab," he explained as he slowly tightened his hold. "Followed by a pull." He tugged to emphasize. "You have several options for extricating yourself, if verbal demands do not work."

"You mean, if I shout for him to stop and he ignores me." Hot Rod's lips twitched, as though he couldn't decide if he were going to smile or frown.

"Yes." Megatron tightened his grip even more, just enough for Hot Rod to feel the pressure on his bones, before he loosened it. "Now pay attention."

"Sir, yes, sir."

Megatron twitched and told himself to ignore Hot Rod's attitude. The smol was young. He'd been hurt. It was only fair.

So Megatron drew upon every ounce of patience in his arsenal and carefully explained a few techniques that could work to free Hot Rod from an assailant likely to be both larger and stronger than he.

Hot Rod was a quick learner, for all that he complained. He relaxed once he realized Megatron was

serious about teaching him and nothing else. It was easier for Megatron when he settled into teaching mode, though he hadn't done so in years. He always thought he didn't have the patience for it.

Or maybe he didn't have the patience for the foolish and lazy, of which Hot Rod was neither.

Chaos struck when Megatron realized that while grabs were important, holds were the most likely assault Hot Rod would expect. Which meant he'd have to touch Hot Rod in more ways than one. He'd have to press his body to Hot Rod's, feel the heat and firmness of it against his own, be surrounded by Hot Rod's sweet inviting scent.

Adaptus save him.

"This is easy!" Hot Rod declared as he broke free of Megatron's grab for the third time, each learned technique becoming more and more natural to him. "What's next?"

Megatron swallowed thickly. He glanced at the sundial and despaired to see that they still had ten minutes left in the lesson. He could call it to an end. Save himself the trouble. But that would be the coward's way out.

"Grabs are easy," Megatron agreed and drew in a heavy breath. "Harder to escape are holds."

"Holds," Hot Rod echoed, and his eyes widened fractionally.

Megatron nodded. "Yes. Though if you feel you've learned enough for the day, I won't insist on it. I don't want you to feel overwhelmed."

Hot Rod stared at him and then his jaw set. Too late did Megatron realize his error. He'd set a challenge before Hot Rod, however inadvertently. There was no chance of escaping this lesson now.

"I can do it," Hot Rod said, squaring his shoulders and looking belligerent. "Show me."

"Very well."

Megatron sounded far more confident than he felt. It had been hard enough, only touching Hot Rod's shoulder or wrist or elbow. But to wrap his arms around the smol, from the front or the back, to press himself to those beautiful feathers – it was tantamount to torture.

He had only himself to blame. And backing down now would make him the coward.

He approached Hot Rod, who watched him warily but with determination. "The most likely assault will come from behind," Megatron explained, proud that he'd kept his voice steady. "Most attackers prefer to choose the moment most advantageous, when they are likely to catch their victims off guard."

Hot Rod nodded. "Makes sense." He braced himself and then slowly turned, offering his back to Megatron.

His back, the sweet curve of his rump, and the fiery spill of his gorgeous feathers. Megatron's mouth went a little dry, his core thumping hard in his chest.

"Like this?" Hot Rod asked, and was Megatron imagining it or was there a quiver in the smol's

voice?

“Yes.” Megatron approached slowly, this was about teaching not frightening, and he didn’t want to startle Hot Rod. “They will likely move quickly, snatching you before you realize they are there.”

Which meant he needed to...

Right.

Megatron drew a deep breath and pressed himself against Hot Rod’s back, trying his best to keep some space between their bodies. Hot Rod’s rump, however, nestled against his thighs, and the smol’s head tucked neatly under his chin. The moment Megatron wrapped his arms around Hot Rod, he’d completely enfolded Hot Rod in his grip.

Hot Rod’s crest feathers tickled his nose. He smelled sweet and tangy, like the blackberries he’d been Gathering not so long ago. Megatron wondered if his mouth would taste the same.

Hot Rod went stiff as a board, an accurate portrayal of how he’d likely react in the same situation, but Megatron knew it had nothing to do with acting. “Then what?” Hot Rod asked and damn, this time his voice was quivering.

“You have several options,” Megatron said, careful to keep his own voice even. Unaffected. “From here, you can reach several sensitive areas, including my solar plexus, groin, and instep. Your elbow can be a very effective weapon if you jab it backward, firm and fast.”

Hot Rod twitched, leaned back a little more, his back and rump pressed to Megatron, and Adaptus, it wasn’t fair. “I’ll hurt you.”

Megatron almost groaned. “Just mimic the motion. You don’t have to put your full strength behind it. Swing your arm back, and I’ll let you know how effective your aim.”

Hot Rod’s elbow struck him right above his mid-section, too far below his solar plexus, but enough to startle any opponent. “There?”

“It’s a start, not effective enough to incapacitate, but a decent warning to let your attacker know you mean business. Try higher,” Megatron suggested, hoping that if he kept it professional, it would be easier to remember why he was doing this.

And tell himself he wasn’t allowed to enjoy the feel of Hot Rod in his arms, warm and sweet, firm and twitchy. The curve of Hot Rod’s neck was so close, calling to Megatron’s teeth, calling for a kiss, a nip. He wanted to slide his hands down Hot Rod’s belly, cup his groin, press fingertips into his sheathes and make Hot Rod moan. Megatron’s clava twitched at the thought, threatening to lengthen.

An elbow bounced against his sternum, lightly but enough to knock some sense into Megatron. He grunted and shook his head.

“Better?” Hot Rod asked, and there was a huskiness to his tone, like he knew what Megatron had just been thinking.

“Yes. Keep in mind, after a blow like that, your assailant is likely to be surprised, maybe enough to let you go, maybe not. Either way, use it to your advantage to try and break free of his hold,”

Megatron said, leaning heavily on his teaching voice to keep his thoughts where they belonged. “You can drop down and dart forward. You can twist free. You can add another blow and a heel stomp for good measure. Whatever it takes.”

Hot Rod pushed back against him again, maybe intentionally, maybe not. “Go down fighting, huh?”

“I would.” Feathers tickled at Megatron’s nose again. He drew in an unsteady breath, Hot Rod’s sweet scent making him dizzy.

He glanced at the sundial. Close enough.

He let go of Hot Rod and stepped back, glad that his arousal had stayed hidden behind his feather down. Though if Hot Rod looked too closely, he’d probably see that Megatron was damp.

“That’s enough lessons for today, I think,” Megatron said, tucking his hands behind his back. They were shaking, and the urge to grab Hot Rod and pull him back close was almost overwhelming.

Hot Rod turned around. “I learned a lot.” He smiled up at Megatron, though it wasn’t as strong as it used to be. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Megatron dipped his head politely. “I’m sure Drift will be present for your next lesson. Good luck.”

He didn’t run away, but it was a close thing to it. He didn’t look back; he didn’t allow himself that weakness. Not when all he could think about was retiring to his nest, closing the door, and finding the nearest pillow to dampen with his spill. He swore he could still smell Hot Rod, could still taste an imagined sweetness on his tongue.

Next time, Megatron would get the details before agreeing to take over Drift’s training session, no matter how desperate his fencemaster appeared.

Chapter 6

Megatron couldn't hide from his paperwork forever.

Two months into Orion's carry, where the swell of the egg was finally noticeable to the discerning eye, Megatron thought he was safe. He assumed Orion would be too distracted by the growing life within him to send Megatron disapproving looks about the state of affairs of his desk.

He should have expected Orion would recruit help.

"Plans for today?" Soundwave asked as he woke Megatron and handed him a bowl of peaches and oats for breakfast.

Megatron blinked blearily up at his Speaker. It seemed far too early to be awake, though the light streaming in through his balcony confirmed it was time. Perhaps he shouldn't have stayed up so late, sharing a bottle of fermented honey with Soundwave. Of course Soundwave would be here, bright and early and chipper – for Soundwave.

His Speaker could drink an entire case of mead and not so much as wobble. Then again, behind the mask, Soundwave could be foggy-eyed and barely alert, and no one would ever know.

Megatron had often heard the humans accusing the harpies of having some kind of special magic. He wondered if, in this case, it were true. No mortal harpy should be able to drink that much and walk away!

"Lay around in the nest and recover from last night?" Megatron replied as he glared at the bowl of oats. He wasn't sure his churning stomach was ready for food. He reached for the cup of water instead.

Soundwave chuckled, raspy though it was.

"You're a lightweight, Megatron," Buzzsaw chirped from his brother's shoulder, still small enough to accomplish that without throwing Soundwave off balance.

Megatron groaned and lay back, throwing his arm wing over his eyes. "Soundwave, your minion is insulting me."

"Plans for today?" Soundwave repeated, but he wasn't so cruel. He nudged a clump of something into Megatron's other hand, which if there truly was a god watching over them, it was salica.

Megatron sighed. "You're asking me only because you already know what I'm going to be doing today, which has nothing to do with what I had planned." He sat up and shoved the bundle into his mouth, grimacing at the bitter bark which was, indeed, willow.

"Correct," Soundwave replied and Buzzsaw chattered a laugh, burying his face against the side of Soundwave's head.

Megatron rubbed at his temples with the heel of his palm. "Very well. What is it?"

"Your office misses you," Buzzsaw said.

Megatron resisted the urge to pull a blanket over his head. "Paperwork. You expect me to spend all day squinting at paperwork in my condition?"

"Precisely." Soundwave tried to hand him the bowl of oats again.

Megatron waved them off and when Soundwave set them aside, Buzzsaw hopped down from his shoulder and toddled over to the bowl.

"Can't have it go to waste," he said and curled around the bowl, shoving huge handfuls of it into his mouth.

Megatron's lips quirked in a grin. That Buzzsaw was starting to get comfortable around him warmed Megatron's core. Of all Soundwave's rescued siblings, Buzzsaw had always been the most clingy and rarely spoke in front of others. When not attached to Soundwave, he was hiding with his twin, often somewhere in the ceiling.

Both Laserbeak and Buzzsaw were small for their age. Very small. It made Megatron wonder if perhaps they were fledges bought or stolen from the pygmy tribe. Not that either would know. They couldn't remember their parents or their original aerie, as they were too young at the time they found themselves in human confinement.

The dull ache in Megatron's head started to fade. At least the salica was working. "Well then," he said, and pulled himself to his feet. "I suppose I'd better get to work."

"Good choice," Soundwave said, humor rich in his tone.

"Let Buzzsaw finish my breakfast. I'll eat later when my stomach doesn't feel like it's trying to crawl out of my throat," Megatron said as he stretched. His spine popped and crackled like a harpy twice his age.

"Noted."

Megatron left them in his nest, thinking longingly of another dose of salica and a barrel of cold water, when he nearly collided with someone just outside his door. He snatched at the poor harpy's shoulders to keep them both from tumbling to the floor, and found himself staring into Hot Rod's startled blue eyes.

"Sir!"

"My apologies, Hot Rod, I had something of a long night." Megatron snatched his hands back and put distance between them. "Carry on."

"I'm actually standing out here to catch you," Hot Rod said, and only then did Megatron notice the armful of documents he carried. "I was told to make sure you found your way to your office this morning."

Megatron almost rolled his eyes. "Let me guess: Orion gave you this mission?"

"Is it so obvious?" Hot Rod chuckled. "Though I don't think I'm physically capable of making you do anything, so I guess I'll just have to ask real nicely."

Heat throbbed through Megatron's core as Hot Rod's last words turned into something closer to a rolling purr. With it came a cheeky grin and a wink and Megatron's hungover senses could only interpret the signs as *'want.'*

He firmly smacked down the impulses and hung a sign over the cage he stuck them inside. 'Can't have.'

"Fine." Megatron rubbed at his forehead again. "I know when I'm defeated. I'll do my paperwork." He turned down the slope and started toward his office. If anyone asked, he absolutely did not trudge.

"Awww. I didn't even get to use my secret weapon," Hot Rod said as he caught up to Megatron with a few happy skips, his feathers bright and fluttering around his face. "Orion told me I could use any means necessary. I think he meant it, too."

Megatron managed a chuckle. "He is far too aware of the methods I use to avoid work I consider tedious."

"So getting drunk was part of the plan?"

"That was Soundwave's fault."

Hot Rod snickered and juggled his armful of scrolls and papers. "I don't think anyone's going to believe that."

"Anyone but Orion would." Megatron sighed theatrically and rubbed at the back of his neck. "He's going to lay in a few weeks, and yet he concerns himself with his duty. I'm going to have to force him to take fledge leave, aren't I?"

Some of the bounce vanished from Hot Rod's step. "Probably." His pace slowed a little, and Megatron dropped back to match it. "You'd know him better than I do."

"I've known him for a long time," Megatron agreed and eyed Hot Rod carefully, in between watching the path ahead of them. The last thing he needed was to collide with someone else in his flock. "Familiarity comes with the territory."

"How long?"

"Have I known Orion? We grew up together." Megatron smiled softly, thinking of the awkward bara who'd been one of the first to extend a hand of friendship, so genuinely Megatron hadn't known Orion was royalty until his parents told him. "He'd had the world handed to him since hatching, and he never took that for granted."

Hot Rod clutched the papers tighter. "Oh. That makes sense then."

"What does?"

Hot Rod shrugged. "Just how you know each other is all." He smiled at Megatron, but it was blinding for its dishonesty. "I've never had any friends like that. It must be nice."

"I am not afraid to admit that I am very lucky to still have him in my life, and Soundwave as well, who I've known since sub-adulthood," Megatron said.

They hit the ground floor and arrived at his office. Megatron tried not to groan with disappointment and ducked into the open doorway, the stack of papers waiting for him tilting ominously in his inbox. No wonder both Orion and Soundwave had been adamant.

Couldn't he just get one of the harpies in his flock to do this tedious work? He was Liege, damn it. He should be out... leading! Mingling! Not sitting behind a desk scrawling his signature and reading inventory lists and drafting yet another version of the Kaon charter.

Yes, Megatron was well aware he should have finished the charter years ago.

Megatron sighed and dropped into his chair, his quill so dry he'd be better off cutting a new one. He hadn't capped his ink pot either, which meant it was sludge by now.

"Oh, damn," he said with an exaggerated exhale. "I'm out of ink. I suppose I can't do this work after all."

There was a small clunk as Hot Rod set an inkpot on a clear spot on his desk, and then tumbled the scrolls and papers he carried next to it. "Orion thinks of everything," he said with a laugh.

"He's pure evil," Megatron groaned, but he immediately pulled out a basket of molted flight feathers – some of his own, some belonging to others. He rifled through them, looking for one he could easily cut to make a quill.

"Well, someone needs to look out for you," Hot Rod said.

"He's going to have a hatchling soon. He needs to start worrying about that," Megatron grunted as he selected one he thought would work and shoved the basket back onto the shelf. "I can take care of myself."

Hot Rod tucked his hands behind his back. "Of course you can. But you are Liege. Even the best of leaders need someone to keep them balanced."

It sounded like a recitation. Megatron tilted his head, looking up at the pretty smol, Starscream's words echoing in the back of his mind. He couldn't imagine Hot Rod was royal. Hot Rod's behavior didn't seem to match such a thought. But sometimes... sometimes Hot Rod said things and the wondering returned.

"That's what I have Soundwave for." Megatron pulled out a quill knife to start dressing the feather. "I have no qualms about seeking the advice of others."

Hot Rod gnawed on his bottom lip. "That's not the same. Advisors and the like, they can help you lead, but they can't help *you*." He bounced on the heels of his tarsals. "You need someone to keep you grounded, or lift you up when you fall."

Megatron very pointedly did not look up at Hot Rod. He kept his gaze focused on the quill. "And I suppose you have someone in mind?"

"I'm not talking about me, frag it. I just--" Hot Rod broke off with a frustrated growl. "Never mind. Liege Megatron knows best after all."

Megatron frowned and looked up at Hot Rod, but the smol had backed toward the doorway. "That's

not what I meant to imply.”

“It’s exactly what you meant,” Hot Rod snapped, and there was a fierceness in his tone Megatron rarely heard from the pretty smol. He dropped his head in a hasty bow. “I’ll be back later for the finished scrolls, sir.”

And then he was gone, ducking under the curtain of Megatron’s door in a flutter of bright orange and red feathers. He moved so quickly he loosed the tie holding the fabric back, and Megatron’s door fell shut.

Megatron spilled a curse under his breath. He sat back in his chair and rubbed a hand down his face, fingers pinching above the bridge of his nose. He was always misstepping with Hot Rod, wasn’t he? Couldn’t he have a normal conversation with the smol? Would there always be this tension?

He couldn’t think. His head hurt too much. He needed a pitcher of water and another handful of willow.

He needed everything to start making sense.

~

Despite claiming he would, Hot Rod did not return that day. Instead, Frenzy showed up later to drop off more paperwork and take what Megatron had completed back to Orion.

“What did ya do to hot stuff, boss?” Frenzy asked as he hopped upon a stool to dump his armload onto Megatron’s desk, sending scrolls rolling in all directions.

Megatron grabbed a stack and plopped it down in front of Frenzy. “These go back to Orion, kiddo.”

“Doesn’t answer my question, boss.”

“I know. I was ignoring you.” Megatron tugged the nearest scroll closer and unrolled it.

He sighed at the sight of another supply requisition log. Orion was torturing him with these on purpose. It was punishment for avoiding his tedious work for too long.

Frenzy released a long, exaggerated sigh. “Oh, come on, boss. Give me some of that good gossip. Kid fire is moping around like someone stole his best friend and if you sign that paper any harder, you’ll tear it.”

Megatron dropped the quill and looked at Frenzy. “Hot Rod is upset?”

“Yeah, like ya didn’t know that.” Frenzy scoffed and rolled his eyes. He bounced on the heels of his feet, pale purple feathers rustling around him. “Would solve everyone’s problems if ya’d just mate ‘im already, ya know. Especially if ya do it... in the next week? Yeah.”

Megatron rubbed at his forehead. “I take it you’ve placed a bet.”

“Now would I do a thing like that?” Frenzy feigned shock. “I’m hurt, boss. Hurt to my core.” He

thumped his chest before he scooped up the pile Megatron had indicated was for Orion. “In fact, I’m so offended that I’m just going to leave.” He huffed and leapt down from the stool, striding toward the door. Only, he paused and gave Megatron a look. “And bro says not to stay up all night. You can work all day tomorrow, too.”

“How kind of him,” Megatron drawled.

Frenzy grinned like the cheeky sub-adult he was and flounced out the door, nearly losing one of the papers from the stack as he did so.

Megatron shook his head and resumed staring at the stacks of documents and scrolls. They seemed never-ending, and it was already getting late. The sun had ceased to cast rays through his windows, and he now worked by the flickering glow of the lightning jars.

One more hour, Megatron told himself. One more hour and he’d collapse in his nest to sleep peacefully. Or be haunted with dreams of dancing scrolls and quills and an ever looming and larger Soundwave.

It had happened before.

Megatron chuckled, pulled out a snack of dried figs, and returned to work.

The sounds of the wind rustling through the leaves accompanied him, as did that of his aerie slowly settling in for the night. He heard the whistles of the night guard communicating to one another: the two at the ground floor entrance and the two perched on the roof. The sweet smell of dough floated to his nose, set out overnight to rise by the morning.

He worked for an hour and not a moment longer. Then he rose to his feet and stretched his arms over his head, his entire body stiff. He looked at the nub of his quill and tossed it into the bin. He’d have to carve a new one tomorrow.

His aerie was still and soft with quiet. It was both soothing and reassuring. Perhaps strange considering his former aerie had been one that was always busy and never silent. There were too many residents to manage it peacefully.

Megatron didn’t miss the chaos at all. His parents, yes. Everything else? Not so much.

Megatron doused the jars and slipped out of his office, tugging the curtain shut behind him. Humans, he knew, had to lock their rooms and their buildings and their offices. Here, that wasn’t a problem. His flock shared everything, and what one didn’t have, it was acquired for them. What need was there for theft?

Most of the lightning jars had been extinguished, Megatron noticed as he started the slow climb upward, toward the main residential levels. There was enough light to see by, but there was something almost quixotic about the flickering shadows and the rustling of the leaves in a growing wind.

Megatron sniffed. Perhaps another storm?

He mentally reviewed who was on guard tonight. Bulkhead and Roadbuster at the ground entrance; Cyclonus and Whirl on the roof. The former two were the best of friends, the latter two... Megatron only hoped he wouldn’t need to separate them again. Who’d agreed to that pair-up?

Megatron looked up, trying to spot Cyclonus and Whirl through the woven netting protecting the highest ceiling from various leaf and branch falls. He did not see the two guards, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but even in the dim of the late night, he spotted the bright splash of orange and red. There was no other in his flock with coloration so bright, like living flame.

Hot Rod clung to one of the upper perches, his tail feathers draping down behind him. His head tilted back as though he looked up at the stars. There was a slump to his shoulders, and something in his posture suggested sorrow.

Megatron slowed to a stop. He contemplated. He remembered Frenzy's words, and the guilt came crashing back. The more he tried to keep from hurting Hot Rod, the more damage he did.

He couldn't just walk away. He would be a poor liege if he left one of his own to sadness. At the very least, he should apologize. Again. It seemed all he was doing as of late was apologizing to Hot Rod.

Megatron climbed to the top rather than fly, using one of the many handholds built into the aerie's base structure. He pulled up onto a perch near Hot Rod's, though the smol's current one was big enough to share. Megatron was far too large to approach quietly, so by the time he arrived at Hot Rod's level, those bright blue eyes were focused on him.

"Out for an evening flight, my liege?" Hot Rod's tone was carefully even, his face blank of expression. He tilted his head.

"Early, early morning would be more accurate." Megatron grunted as he crouched on the thick branch, all the better not to loom over Hot Rod. "But no, I haven't the energy left for a flight." The climb alone had taken more out of him than he expected.

"Paperwork that exhausting?"

"Far so more than anything else."

Hot Rod's lips twitched as they might toward a smile. "Then what brings you up here tonight?"

"You."

Hot Rod visibly startled, and it took him a moment to regain his composure. "Have I misbehaved?"

Megatron exhaled. "I wanted to apologize," he said. "For my behavior earlier. I jumped to conclusions and took out my frustrations on you. It was unseemly, especially for a liege, to behave in such a manner, and you did not deserve it."

"I see." Hot Rod's gaze remained even. His feet started to swing where they hung in mid-air. "Apology accepted."

Megatron blinked. He'd expected more of an argument. More of... something. Frenzy had said Hot Rod was upset, and yes, the pretty smol was behaving oddly, but he didn't appear upset. Hot Rod was not normally the sort to hold back either. No, he very much wore his emotions where all could see them.

"I... Good." Megatron leaned back, resting his arms over his knees, his talons curling tighter around

the perch. He should take the opportunity to return to his nest now, but curiosity made him linger. “What brings you up here tonight?”

Hot Rod chuckled, but it didn't sound like humor. He looked toward the horizon. “There's nowhere to sleep.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Drift and Perceptor are occupied. Orion has entered the third phase.” Hot Rod stretched, lifting his legs out in front of him, talons pointing upward. “There must be something in the air, judging by the sounds floating out of Rung and Maximus' nest.”

“I see.” Megatron gnawed on his bottom lip. As liege, this would be where he offered a place in his own nest for the lonesome smol, but therein lay only pain. “You know, Hot Rod, there are many empty nests in the aerie for you to--”

“Pass.” Hot Rod shifted, hooking his talons on the perch and standing. “I'll figure something else out.”

Megatron sighed and rubbed a hand over his temples. “Why are you fighting this? I don't understand you.”

“No. You don't.” Now it was Hot Rod's turn to sound frustrated. “Back in my old aerie, a smol didn't leave the nest until he was mated. Sometimes, not even then if his mate was of lower rank. It goes against everything ingrained in me to live alone.”

“You're in Kaon now. You can forget those rules.”

Hot Rod shook his head and looked at Megatron. “That's not the point. I know I can forget those traditions, that doesn't mean I want to.”

Megatron rubbed harder at his head, feeling an ache behind his temples. Hot Rod perplexed him like no other. “I'd ask what it is you want, but I suspect I already know. The real question is what you're going to do when you realize it's never going to happen.”

“Never,” Hot Rod repeated, an odd note to his voice.

He tilted his head, eyes narrowing, before he walked the length of his perch toward Megatron. He leapt, landing on the end of Megatron's branch, within touching distance if Megatron was so inclined.

That ruffling breeze brought to him Hot Rod's scent, warm and sweet and mineral. He must have just soaked in the springs.

Megatron's core thumped, his insides twisting and curling with heat. His mouth watered, the urge to draw Hot Rod closer, to feel the lithe body against his, rose up like fire. His groin tightened, clava stirring with interest, as it always did when Hot Rod was involved.

“Is there another you have your eye on, my liege?” Hot Rod asked. It was barely louder than a murmur this time, almost taken by the wind, and Megatron found himself unconsciously leaning closer to catch his words.

“I’ve already told you the answer to that,” Megatron replied. He licked his lips, swearing he could taste Hot Rod on them, though it was only the smol’s scent on the wind.

“You’ve told me a lie.” Hot Rod inched closer, until Megatron felt like he were the one being stalked and not the other way around. The perch creaked.

Megatron growled. “This is about Starscream, isn’t it?” he demanded. Annoyance filtered in through the desire. “I’ve already told you--”

“I know it’s not Starscream,” Hot Rod interrupted with a low growl of his own. “But there has to be someone else.”

“Why? Because you can’t stand thinking there’s someone prettier than you?” Megatron rolled his eyes. His plumage fluffed with irritation. “Or is it that you’re so convinced you’re irresistible? Maybe you’d prefer that I liked someone, anyone, so long as I chose them over choosing to be alone rather than with you. Is that it?”

Hot Rod’s eyes went narrow and hard, like the nearby pond frozen in the brief, but harsh winter month. “You think I’m that shallow?”

“I don’t know what you are.” Megatron shifted toward Hot Rod, a cramp in his thighs urging that he stand, but he didn’t want to come across as aggressive. Words would have to do. “All I know is I’m tired of being chased, and you’re someone who can’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Hot Rod reared back, his feathers fluffing around him as though in self-defense. He backtracked on the branch, which swayed alarmingly, forcing his talons to dig in deeper.

“Frag your apology,” Hot Rod hissed, and fell back another step, every limb trembling with anger. “Because the last time I checked, you came up here to me.”

Clarity returned a moment too late.

Hot Rod dropped down from the ledge, spreading his wings to slow his fall, before Megatron could even speak. He didn’t look up as he stormed away. To where, Megatron did not know. Hot Rod had no nest, and he’d already stated his usual sleeping arrangements were unavailable to him.

Adaptus save him.

Megatron stood to ease the cramps in his legs and scrubbed hard at his temples. The harder he tried, the harder he failed. Why could he not have a normal conversation with Hot Rod?

Another growl slipped past his lips. Megatron stared down through the leaves, but Hot Rod was already gone from sight. It was safe, then, for Megatron to descend and seek out his own nest.

Clearly, he was not fit company tonight.

Chapter 7

Sleep tormented Megatron.

He tossed and turned in a nest-berth suddenly far too large and cold. His body ached, and not just because he'd spent the day hunched over his desk. He burned with an inner flame, a need he refused to handle because he should have more control than this. He would not orgasm to thoughts of Hot Rod writhing beneath him, to the sweet cries of the beautiful smol, or the burn of ecstasy in Hot Rod's eyes.

If he slept, it was in fitful snatches.

Soundwave had no need to wake him. Megatron was up before the sun rose, his head throbbing and his eyes raw and scratchy. He stared out at encroaching dawn, lips pressed to a thin line, indecision clawing at the back of his throat.

He wanted advice. He couldn't go to Orion. Not for this and especially not with Hot Rod now being Orion's designated assistant.

Megatron sighed. He spun on a tarsal and headed back to his office. He wouldn't call it hiding, but it was close to it. If he buried himself in paperwork, maybe he could get distracted enough not to gnaw on his problems over and over.

At least, that was the plan.

He had an unsatisfying breakfast of too-old cranberry scones and washed it down with lukewarm water. He gnawed on the too-hard scones to keep from grinding his teeth. He kept reading the same scroll over and over, because the words wouldn't settle in his head. He rubbed at his temples until his finger joints ached.

A shadow darkened his doorway. Megatron half-expected it to be Soundwave, with another chiding look and something resembling a better breakfast. Barring that, he thought it might be one of the twins or Ravage with an armful of more work.

He did not expect to look up and see Orion duck through the door, his belly visibly round. His eyes were bright, like one who was gravid and delighted to be so. Which was no doubt apt. If they had been back in Crystal City, Orion would not have been allowed to carry. His mate, who would have been a smol, would have that task.

"You're supposed to be resting," Megatron said as he rushed to stand, his stool toppling behind him and a few documents fluttering at the abrupt movement. He scrambled to grab them, and knocked over his inkpot.

He stared, aghast, as dark stain spilled over his entire stack of completed paperwork. All which would now have to be carefully re-penned and marked.

Orion chuckled and appeared to magic a towel out of thin air. "How can I rest when it's clear how much you need me?"

He shooed Megatron away, lifted the soaked papers before they could ruin the others, and expertly

cleaned up the mess without getting so much as a drop on himself.

It was unseemly.

Megatron sighed and focused on moving his inkpot far away and stacking the rest of the work somewhere safer. “You should have sent someone. I would have come to you.”

“I needed the exercise.” Orion tossed the ink-stained towel into the bin. It would be collected and washed later. “Besides, you know who my assistant is, and I couldn’t very well have sent him here after last night.”

Megatron’s shoulders slumped. “My the rumor mill travels fast.”

“Indeed it does.” Orion offered him a smile, but it was sympathetic rather than cruel. He stood a little higher, one hand resting over his belly. “One might blame Soundwave’s siblings. Or one might blame a very frustrated and confused smol who has been simultaneously sulking and seething in my office.”

Probably both then.

Megatron swallowed a sigh and hurried to offer Orion his chair, moving it out from behind the cramped confines of his desk. It wouldn’t do for Orion to crouch on the small stool Frenzy and Rumble used to reach Megatron’s desk.

“I can stand for a few minutes, Megatron,” Orion said with an exasperated roll of his eyes, but he took the offer anyway. “I’m not an invalid. I’m egg-heavy.”

“Never let it be said I’m not a gracious host.” Perhaps he hadn’t completely escaped his Crystal City roots. He could no more let an egg-heavy Orion stand than he could let a not egg-heavy Orion stand.

Not the primeling. Not the prince. Any harpy – bara or smol – would be honored to give up their seat to their future Prime.

Orion chuckled. “I didn’t intend to stay that long but if you insist.” He wiggled to get comfortable, hand still resting over his belly, and despite all that, the look he leveled on Megatron was serious. Chastising almost.

“Do you want to tell me why my assistant is in a mood?”

“I thought he told you already?” Megatron started shuffling the papers on his desk. They were in disarray after all. He needed to tidy immediately.

“I wanted to hear your version.”

Megatron pressed his lips together. Orion had a way of talking, a neutrality to his tone, that left one feeling open and unjudged. Orion was always fair in everything he did. But he also had complete faith in people, and believed there was always a silver lining. Optimism was where Orion excelled.

He couldn’t understand why Megatron had yet to mate. He didn’t understand why Megatron wouldn’t accept Hot Rod. He would never know the reasons because Megatron would never tell him.

“I noticed he was alone,” Megatron said, choosing his words carefully. “It was very late. As liege, I was concerned. I wanted to make sure he had somewhere to sleep. I also needed to apologize for my behavior in an earlier... discussion.” He paused as shame prickled his face with heat. “I made the mistake of several assumptions. I owe him another apology.”

Orion made a noncommittal noise. “I see.”

Megatron felt the weight of Orion’s rebuke in those two words. “I will apologize once emotions have cooled.”

“Apologies are never wasted,” Orion agreed, but there was a cutting force behind his eyes, that for a shade, were a near match for Hot Rod’s. “If I were to ask you a question, would you answer me honestly?”

“Of course.” He didn’t even have to think about it.

Orion leveled him with a look. “You truly do not desire Hot Rod?”

Megatron winced before he could cast a mask over it. His core thumped in his chest, screaming danger at him. “Desire is not the problem,” he hedged.

“Then why not accept his courtship?”

“It’s complicated.” He found it safer to stare at his desk, at the haphazard stacks of documents, many of which contained Orion’s neat script. Swooping lines and tight circles and little dotted letters. It was so familiar to him, a memory of home he’d been able to bring with him.

“Is there someone you have feelings for?”

He’d promised to answer honestly.

“You don’t have to tell me who.”

Megatron breathed in and out. He nudged a paper aside with the tip of his forefinger. “Yes.”

Orion’s voice stayed warm and sympathetic. “It must truly be complicated then, for you to care for someone you think you cannot have. There is no one in this flock who doesn’t love their liege.”

“That is part of the problem.” Megatron lifted his gaze back to Orion’s, hating and appreciating the sympathy he saw in his oldest and dearest friend’s eyes. “I can’t return Hot Rod’s affections, Orion, but that doesn’t mean I am lonely or unfulfilled. I am satisfied with what I have.”

“You deserve more than a life of solitude, Megatron.” Orion’s voice was quiet. Concerned.

It hurt to hear. Orion had treated him like an older brother when they were fledglings and young adults. Nowadays, he’d shifted to viewing Megatron like an errant younger sibling. Either way, he’d always looked to Megatron as family.

It felt a betrayal, sometimes, to look at Orion and feel the unrequited love burning him from the inside out. An abject betrayal of the pure affection Orion carried for him.

"I am liege. I am never truly alone." Megatron managed a smile, small though it was. He knew something larger wouldn't convince Orion. They knew each other too well.

"There are different kinds of solitude. You will always have your flock, yes, but you need someone at your side. Someone to support you, especially in private, so you don't always have to be strong," Orion replied, his words eerily echoing Hot Rod's.

The guilt returned afresh. Megatron had overreacted to Hot Rod. He'd assumed and attacked Hot Rod out of personal frustration.

Megatron wanted, and he couldn't have, and it seemed he was doomed to a lifetime of the same.

He dipped his head. "As always, your advice helps to clear the muddle from my mind."

"You know I will support you always. But I also want to see you happy." Orion stroked a hand over his belly, his gaze softening. "We left Crystal City for a reason. I've found my joy since then. I want the same for you, my brother."

"And I will. Eventually." Megatron tried for a nonchalant shrug. "When the time is right. Whenever that might be."

Orion nodded. "Very well. I won't keep pestering you about it." He paused and tilted his head. "I won't pretend to understand your complications, so long as you are aware you're being quite unfair to Hot Rod."

Megatron blinked. "How so? He's made his overtures, I've refused him. I can't be any more clear."

"Your refusals sound more like maybes, Megatron. It's quite obvious you're attracted to him. You can't blame him for being confused when you push him away at the same time you get closer to him."

Megatron stared. Orion had spoken plainly to him, but the words didn't make sense. It took all he had not to drop his jaw. "Are you calling me a tease?"

Orion outright chuckled. "Only because I can get away with it. And only because I'm not sure you know entirely what you're doing."

Megatron frowned. "I think you're opinion of this situation is skewed. I have, quite plainly, refused Hot Rod's affections. Any other kindness on my part is being misconstrued as I am only attempting to look after my flock as any liege should."

"Be that as it may, it would hurt no one if you were... more aware of yourself and your words around Hot Rod. For both of your sakes," Orion conceded with a tip of his head. There was chastisement in his tone once again, but he managed it so gently, so politely, it was hard to take offense.

Megatron sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He'd been raised a soldier, not a public servant. His speech remained rough around the edges as a result. But he would heed Orion's advice.

"I will keep my distance," he conceded. "And I will learn to master my words."

"I already know you will." Orion beamed at him, like a fledgeling who successfully passed his

exams. “Believe it or not, I actually didn’t come to berate you about your relationship with Hot Rod.”

Megatron failed to stop a snort. “Oh?” He let tension drain from his body, now that the conversation topic had shifted.

“I just wanted to make sure you knew you were allowed to miss work to attend the welcoming ceremony at the end of the week.” Orion chuckled softly, humor brightening his eyes the way it always did, and Megatron’s breath caught in his throat.

Megatron grinned in reply. “I’m allowed, am I? Shall I revise the chain of command again? Let everyone know who really runs things around here?”

Orion leveraged himself to his feet, the chair rocking behind him. “It can be our little secret.” He winked playfully. “I couldn’t very well make you miss it. There are two more joining our flock.”

“Three,” Megatron corrected. He grinned with a lot of teeth. Very proud teeth. “Terradive is carrying, too. He’s been keeping it quiet, wanting to wait until the ceremony to announce it.”

“Really? That’s wonderful!” Orion’s eyes lit up, his feathers fluffing around him with glee. “Oh, he and Rotor must be delighted.”

“Very.”

Terradive’s carry would be the mated couple’s first. Well, first successful. Both Terradive and Rotor were baras and both had struggled to conceive and carry beyond the first month. Repeated miscarries had nearly drained them both of hope.

This little one would be their miracle.

Megatron’s grin widened. “But it’s our little secret. No one else knows outside of Ratchet and Soundwave.”

“Because of course, Soundwave knows everything.” Orion chuckled and rubbed his belly thoughtfully. He nibbled on his bottom lip. “It is a good year for miracles.”

Happiness and jealousy collided. They formed a lump in his throat, one Megatron forced a smile around. He was delighted Orion had found his joy. He didn’t even resent Shockwave for it.

Grief had no place here. He’d learned to mourn this loss a long time ago.

“Yes,” Megatron agreed. “It is.”

~

The end of the week arrived sooner than Megatron expected. He did not find opportunity to seek out Hot Rod and apologize. Partially because he’d become so busy finalizing preparations for the welcoming ceremony, and in part because Hot Rod suddenly became difficult to find.

If Megatron put a word on it, he'd say Hot Rod was avoiding him. Which was probably for the better. Distance could only help.

The Welcoming arrived and with it, the entire atmosphere around the aerie changed. The overall sense of activity doubled, and the energy shifted to festive and cheerful, chasing away the last of the cool season doldrums. New additions to the flock were always celebrated, especially when they were young.

The Welcoming was less ceremony and more celebration, but this would be the first year they had more than a single birth to celebrate. Three hatchlings from a single mating season! It was unprecedented for Megatron's tiny flock. It was laughable, compared to the dozens, hundreds even, of other flocks.

But here, every new harpy was precious.

The egg-heavy carriers sat upon their throne of choice, sire at their side, glowing with pride. One by one, the residents of Kaon Aerie arrived to present them a gift, usually something hand-made to assist in the raising of the hatchling. Blankets, teething rings, toys, scratching blocks, et cetera. Given their trade agreement with the humans, they now had even more new and unusual things to offer as gifts.

The food preparers had worked tirelessly this week, crafting and baking trays of treats and brewing ciders and meads. Someone had taken the time to string brightly colored streamers all around the interior of the ground floor, and little lights glowed in a rainbow of colors. They were powered by a solar battery, another benefit of their trading with the local humans.

A trio of musicians played in the corner, but they would be spelled from time to time by a small music player plugged into a solar battery. For now, the lovely song of flute, drums, and voice joined in harmony carried through the air. Cyclonus, for all his rough appearance, had a wonderful singing voice.

The celebration was in full-swing, here after dark with the lanterns adding to the glow of the multicolored lights and the low murmur of conversation just audible below the music.

The three carriers were arranged around the atrium floor, with Terradive holding court over the largest crowd. The entire flock had mourned with Terradive during he and Rotor's multiple miscarries. Now, the mated couple would have no shortage of congratulations.

Orion and Shockwave had a huddle of their own, Shockwave standing just behind Orion, his hands on Orion's shoulders and beaming with pride and delight. Orion's soft smile glowed with his own happiness as one hand rested on the roundness of his belly. A small pile of gifts had already accumulated in the large basket next to him. Megatron knew more would come.

Megatron had already extended his congratulations to Terradive and Rotor, giving them a small teething block for the fledge he'd carved by hand. He'd congratulated Radiance and Windfall as well, who as of yet, were the only mated couple in Megatron's flock who were both smols. This was only their second season as mates, and their first child. They'd received a hand-carved teething block as well.

Megatron's gift for Orion and Shockwave was a little more personal. He didn't want to present it in front of the crowd, however, so he held on to it and focused on making the rounds. He kept to the periphery of the gathering, keeping an eye on his flock.

They clustered together in small groups, chatting and laughing, smiling and eating. Contentment radiated from his flock as a whole, and Megatron couldn't be more proud.

His eyes found Hot Rod in the crowd, tucked in a corner with Bulkhead and Maximus and Rung. Hot Rod was laughing as he nudged Bulkhead with an elbow, and the large bara ducked his head, rubbing the back of it as if embarrassed. Hot Rod grinned at him, eyes as blue as a sunny spring day. He leaned in close to Bulkhead again, highlighting the height difference between them.

Hot Rod's forehead would barely graze Bulkhead's shoulder. He was a third Bulkhead's mass. Their colors clashed horribly. Hot Rod was far too bright, too brilliant, to stand next to Bulkhead's dull olive and tan highlights.

"Stare any harder and you're gonna set 'em on fire."

Megatron startled at the comment and laugh bubbling up from behind him. He gathered his composure over his shoulders and turned slowly, rather than whip around in an offended spin.

"I don't know what you mean," he said smoothly, recognizing the lazy drawl as belonging to Whirl, a bara who had come to them from the Crystal City Aerie, not but a few years after Megatron had left, point of fact.

A blue so pale he was nearly white, the feathertips blackened as though dipped in ash, Whirl was just a shade too dull to be classed as a smol. He was tall, almost taller than Megatron, but he lacked the mass that many others of similar height had. He was sleek and gangly, all long limbs and feathers, his body covered in scars which were evidence of a lifetime of military service.

The adorable grey and blue fledgeling clinging to his shoulder and watching Megatron with solemn eyes always softened Whirl's fierce facade. It was impossible to feel threatened when Skydive chirped from the concealment of his carrier's feathers.

Whirl cackled. "Sure ya don't." One hand lifted, forefinger curling to tip a knuckle under his fledgeling's chin. Skydive blinked slowly and nuzzled his carrier's finger, yet his gaze never left Megatron.

He was a wary child. He'd been born here in Kaon, but something in Skydive's quiet demeanor spoke of the sire Megatron had never met. Whirl didn't speak of him and ignored questions about him. Whirl had come to Kaon about to start his second month of carry, and boldly asked for a home. He'd been tired, worn down by his travels especially in such a draining part of his carry and for a bara as well, but he hadn't appeared abused or mistreated.

Megatron did not know what had driven Whirl from Crystal City, nor did he ask. That was Whirl's business alone to share. He'd been welcomed, just like any other.

Whirl fit in well here. And Skydive would, too.

"Ya know Bulkhead ain't got no interest in the kid, right?" Whirl continued with an all-knowing smirk. "He's still waitin' on that stupid zing of his."

Megatron shook his head. "There is nothing stupid about believing in soul mates. It's what brings Bulkhead comfort."

Whirl barked a laugh and nuzzled his fledgeling again. "He ain't never gonna find his soulmate

lingering around here. We're the smallest flock in all of Cybertron. If ya ask me, it's just an excuse."

"For what?"

"To stay outta something painful." Whirl's tone softened then, his pale yellow eye shifting down to Skydive. "It ain't worth it."

Megatron folded his hands behind his back, the feathers of his wings trailing along the floor. "You cannot look at Skydive like that and expect me to believe it wasn't worth it."

"Sky's worth everything," Whirl retorted with a sharp look Megatron's direction, one just shy of disrespectful. "But what I had ta give up, what I left behind, this sharp crack deep down inside o' me. I can't blame Bulk for wantin' to avoid that." Whirl plucked Skydive from his shoulder and offered the fledge to Megatron.

Skydive making grabby hands for Megatron made it impossible to resist him. So Megatron accepted the little one, tucking Skydive against his chest with a single hand. Skydive snuggled close, head pressed over Megatron's core.

"I know ya understand, boss," Whirl said.

Megatron stroked down Skydive's back as the fledge warbled a few nonsense words. Skydive had some limited speech, but often devolved into hatchling garble. "What do you mean?"

"No one looks at kid fire the way ya do and does nothin' about it if they don't already know what it is to burn."

Megatron looked up at Whirl, but Whirl had crossed his arms, his lip curled in a small smile as he stared across the room. He was watching Hot Rod and Bulkhead, but there was something in his expression Megatron couldn't name. A mixture of envy and regret, perhaps longing as well.

"There may be some truth in what you say," Megatron said at length.

"Heh. I know there is." Whirl rubbed the pad of his thumb over Skydive's head. "Keep bit for awhile if ya want. I see a table fulla mead callin' for me."

Megatron chuckled. "Careful. I may keep him forever."

"I'd never let that happen." Whirl bared his teeth in a show of sharp canines, sharper than many in Megatron's flock kept. "Ain't no one ever takin' him from me. No one." There was an edge of something there, hinting to whatever it was Whirl had escaped upon leaving Crystal City.

Megatron inclined his head. "Of course." He gestured to the treats and drinks with his free hand. "Go. Treat yourself. I'll watch over Skydive for you."

Whirl sketched a salute. "Don't have to tell me twice, boss." He winked and spun toward the tables laden with food and drink, nothing of the earlier dark sitting on his shoulders.

Impulse struck Megatron. "Whirl?"

The other bara paused and looked over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

Megatron held Skydive a little tighter. “The one who burned you... do you still love him?”

Whirl laughed, dark and deprecating. “Always,” he said. “I never stopped.” He scraped a hand over his head, briefly smoothing down the crest of feathers. “That’s the thing about the fire. It’s a curse.”

“So it is,” Megatron murmured.

He doubted Whirl heard him, but the other bara barked a laugh and headed back for the table of goodies, squirming between Mirage and Tracks to do so. Mirage said something to Whirl, likely a rebuke, but Whirl just laughed and plucked Chase from Mirage’s shoulder, plopping the bright blue and white fledge onto his own.

It took a flock...

Hatchlings never lacked for love in Megatron’s flock. There was always someone present to care for them, look after them, make them understand that they were loved and welcome and accepted no matter what.

Skydive squirmed in his arms before settling again, and Megatron stroked a hand down the fledge’s back. He looked over the crowd again.

Unintentionally, he found Hot Rod once more, no longer with Bulkhead. He’d moved to the small grouping of Perceptor, Drift, and Starscream now. The newcomer to Megatron’s flock had an arm across Hot Rod’s shoulders and was leaning heavily against him. Hot Rod didn’t seem to mind, if the grin and laugh were any indication.

A squirm took up residence in Megatron’s belly. It was not jealousy.

Megatron made himself look elsewhere. He glanced in Orion and Shockwave’s direction, where the cluster of congratulating flock had disappeared. Now was his chance.

Orion was admiring the weave of a small basket someone had gifted him when Megatron arrived. Shockwave stood behind him still, but he’d half-turned, deep in conversation with Brainstorm about something that went so far above Megatron’s head, it might as well be orbiting Cybertron.

“Looks like you have gathered quite the bounty.” Megatron tipped his head in congratulations, a note of body language that seemed universal across all harpykind.

Orion beamed with delight, his entire face aglow. “Indeed, I have. I think we have everything we might need and more.” He chuckled and set the small basket into a larger one overflowing with gifts. He spotted, as many new carriers did, the little one clutching Megatron’s chest. “And who do you have?”

Megatron lifted his hand so more of Skydive was visible. “My favorite.”

“Ah. Skydive.” Orion leaned forward and Megatron obliged, so that he might reach easier. “You look good holding a fledgeling,” Orion added as he held a forefinger to the little one who had slipped into a doze against Megatron’s chest.

Skydive burbled a sound of annoyance and snuggled harder into Megatron’s feathers, hands tightening where they clutched him.

“You say that because your nesting instincts grow stronger by the day,” Megatron teased to hide the sharp stab of pain in his core.

“Mmm. Perhaps.” Orion settled back, a soft smile on his lips. “You deserve a family, Megatron. You deserve this happiness. Maybe I’m nesting. Or maybe I just want to see my dearest friend as full of joy as I am.” He rested a hand over his belly, so round that like most carriers, he was forced to waddle nearly everywhere.

Megatron returned the soft smile. “I am happy, Orion. How can I not be, leading a flock such as this.” He couldn’t imagine, back in Crystal City, being allowed to walk around with someone else’s fledgling cradled against his chest. Not as a soldier, a guardian tasked to defend the primeling with his own life if that came necessary.

“There are different measures of happiness,” Orion murmured as he leaned back, into the cradle of Shockwave’s arm as Shockwave’s attention drifted back to him.

“My liege.” Shockwave dipped his head in greeting. “Ah, Skydive. I won’t tell Whirl you stole him if you don’t.”

Megatron chuckled. “Whirl passed him onto me, if you must know. I promise I’m not stealing him.” He supposed his affection for the little one was not as hidden as he thought. “Also, I thought you should know, I do have a gift for you. It simply wasn’t practical to haul it here. It waits in your nest.”

“You did too much, didn’t you?” Orion said with an exasperated, if not fond sigh. His blue crest feathers twitched. “You know you don’t have to give me anything special. I’m just Orion.”

He would never be just Orion.

“You are that and more, love.” Shockwave brushed a kiss over the crown of Orion’s head, nuzzling his tufts of feathers. “Thank you, Megatron. I’m sure it will be lovely, whatever it is.”

“You’re welcome. And I’m allowed to spoil whoever I like, thank you very much.” Megatron forced out a small laugh as his peripheral vision caught others heading their way, no doubt to congratulate Orion and Shockwave. “Congratulations again, you two. I can’t wait to see him.”

Their matching smiles made the tight knot in his belly loosen. It would always hurt, Megatron knew, but he was genuinely happy for them. Genuinely relieved to see Orion be himself, be filled with joy, rather than weighted down by the expectations his sire had placed on him.

Megatron took the opportunity to excuse himself and returned to wandering the crowd. The trio of musicians had stepped down in favor of the music player, allowing them a much needed break. Megatron snagged a tartlet from the well-grazed refreshment table.

His circles took him near Hot Rod’s little group, unchanged from earlier. They were all four sipping on mead. No, correction. Three sipped on mead; Hot Rod held a bowl of raspberries, a rare treat they usually had to trade with the university humans to acquire. His lips were stained pink by the berries.

Megatron drifted close enough to capture Drift’s attention before he realized what he was doing.

“Megatron!” Drift waved him over, gesturing with his cup. “Come help us break the tie.”

Megatron planted a neutral expression on his face and joined them. “Am I an arbiter now?” he asked teasingly. “Perhaps I should consider adding such as we grow as a flock.”

“We’re not that big yet.” Drift laughed and clung to Perceptor’s side, wobbling a bit on his feet. Someone had imbibed a bit too much of the mead apparently.

Megatron chuckled. “There is yet time.” He tipped his head in greeting to everyone, even as he found himself squeezed between Hot Rod and Drift, fully aware of Hot Rod at his side, smelling sweet and warm. “And what it is you need me to vote on?”

“It’s stupid,” Hot Rod said, rolling his eyes, but there was amusement in his voice. “I said that Ratchet is the oldest member of the flock, and Drift agrees with me.”

“Meanwhile Perceptor and I both know that while Ratchet acts like he’s older than Adaptus himself, it’s actually Rung who holds the title of supreme elder here,” Starscream said with a huff. He jostled Hot Rod with his elbow.

Megatron laughed. It truly was a ridiculous discussion to have. “Well, we don’t have such a title here, but I can tell you the truth.” He leaned in close, because the last thing he needed was for Ratchet to overhear him. “You are all wrong. Cyclonus is older than Rung by a full year, and Ratchet by nearly a decade.”

Four sets of eyes rounded in surprise.

“My. Someone is aging well,” Starscream finally said, appreciation in his eyes as he glanced Cyclonus’ direction. “Would that we could all appear so... robust.”

Hot Rod burst into laughter. “Careful, Star. You’re sounding a bit hungry there.”

Starscream rolled his eyes. “Nothing of the sort. Cyclonus is far from my type. I simply know how to appreciate a good landscape.”

Perceptor, however, had the gleam of interest in his eyes. “Cyclonus is from Tetrahex, yes?” he said, though it came across less of a question and more of a request for confirmation. “Is it not--”

“--rumored to be the birthing ground of all harpies? Why yes it is.” Starscream sipped at his mead. “How interesting. I wonder if Cyclonus would mind a few questions.”

Hot Rod playfully slapped Starscream’s arm. “Hey, no scientific investigating! You promised we’d go exploring tomorrow.”

“There’s time for both,” Starscream purred in reply.

“Exploring?” Megatron asked and hoped he didn’t sound jealous. “Outside of the aerie?”

“Relax, sir.” Drift patted Megatron’s arm. Or at least he attempted to. The first two tries were a miss. “I’m going with them. Perceptor, too. They’ll be safe.”

“*They* can take care of themselves,” Starscream said with a huff, but there was something about the look in his eyes that suggested he was honored by the concern expressed for him.

Skydive made a sound then, a cross between a whine and a chirp. Megatron looked down as the

fledge started to wriggle, his eyes opening and looking around them as if confused. He looked up at Megatron and yawned, tiny claws digging into Megatron's chest.

"Awake again, I see." Megatron loosened his hold so Skydive could climb if he so wished. "Are you hungry, little one?"

Skydive's blunt tarsals dug into Megatron's feathers. "Hungry!" he confirmed and nuzzled Megatron's chest, like the adorable little ball of grey fluff that he was. "Where's Care?"

"Your carrier is around here somewhere. Would you like me to find him?" Megatron asked.

"No. Here's fine. Hungry!" Skydive looked up at him, eyes big and pleading and impossible to resist.

"Do you like raspberries?" Hot Rod leaned in close, his breath smelling sweet and seductive. He brushed against Megatron's arm, the brief touch sending a wave of heat through Megatron's body.

He swallowed a groan.

Skydive wriggled around and reached for the bowl in Hot Rod's hand. "Yes, please."

Hot Rod laughed and popped one of the raspberries into Skydive's mouth. "I guess I can share if it's with you."

Starscream snorted and crossed his arms. "And yet when I tried to have one, you nearly bit my finger off." He arched a brow.

"You're not an adorable hatchling," Hot Rod retorted with a flick of his tailfeathers.

Were they flirting?

Hot Rod fed Skydive another raspberry, and Skydive made grabby hands at him, as though he wanted Hot Rod to hold him instead. Probably because Hot Rod had the food. Megatron tried not to feel betrayed.

"I am adorable whether I'm a hatchling or not," Starscream retorted.

Perceptor arched an eyebrow as he sipped on his own mead. "Adaptus save me, I cannot sit through this discussion again."

"What? Were you arguing over which of you is the more attractive?" Megatron asked.

"Yes," Perceptor said, while the three smols fervently denied it in unison. Frankly, Megatron was more inclined to believe Perceptor.

"There's no argument," Drift said as he curled into Perceptor's side, nuzzling his mate's throat. "No need to. Right, only one?"

"I've told you once already I'm not participating in such a puerile discussion." Nevertheless, Perceptor's arm slid around Drift, his hand resting neatly on his mate's hip.

Hot Rod popped another raspberry into Skydive's mouth. "So when are you two going to try for one

of these?" he asked, changing the subject.

"We're not," Perceptor replied as Drift nodded.

"Hatchlings and fledges are adorable, don't get us wrong, we just don't want one for ourselves," Drift added with a little shrug. He nipped at Perceptor's throat, and Perceptor patted his hip in soft chastisement.

Megatron's eyebrows climbed toward his crown. This was the first he'd heard of this. Not that they were required to tell anyone, and neither were they required to reproduce if they didn't want to. It was just rare to hear, especially from a couple mated as long as they were. Though he supposed it made sense.

They'd been together for at least a decade. By now, most couples would have had at least one hatchling, if not two.

"Neither of us have any interest in raising a hatchling. We don't have the time or the dedication, and we feel it is the sort of thing we cannot undergo with anything less than one-hundred percent of our devotion." Perceptor's arm tightened around Drift. "We are too familiar with neglect to do otherwise."

Starscream nodded with understanding. "Then you're in the perfect flock. I can't imagine any other accepting your decision."

"Reproduction is one of many methods of control exerted by the leaders of other aeries," Perceptor agreed. He sipped again at his mead before offering the cup to Drift.

"Oh, Adaptus," Hot Rod rolled his eyes and sighed. "If you two are going to start talking ethics again, I'm going to steal Drift and run away."

Drift snorted. "I like the ethics talk."

"Of course you do." Hot Rod looked up at Megatron with big, pleading blue eyes. "You'll save me, won't you, Megatron?" If there was any uncertainty, any discomfort considering their last conversation, Hot Rod didn't show it.

The urge to give Hot Rod everything and more flew up inside of him. Megatron had to claw and bite it down, shove it deep, under the dark and dim.

He forced a chuckle out. "Well, it is something of my duty as liege to rescue any of my flock who need it."

Skydive squirmed in his arms, making more urgent sounds, before he climbed up Megatron's chest and peered over his shoulder. "Want carrier," he chirped as he half-sprawled over Megatron's shoulder and tucked his head against Megatron's neck.

"Seems like the little one needs rescuing first," Starscream observed in an even tone. He sipped on his mead and gave Megatron a look he couldn't quite decipher. "Too bad, Hot Rod. Guess you're stuck with the science. Maybe you'll actually learn something."

Hot Rod's lower lip popped out, his eyes going liquid. "You're so mean."

“And yet you like me anyway.” Starscream tapped Hot Rod on the nose, giving him a little indulgent smile. “Or maybe I don’t have room in my nest for a little lost smol anymore...”

At least worry about where Hot Rod had spent the one night was no longer needed. Apparently, he’d found another nest to take him in.

“Did I say ‘mean’? I meant ‘nice’. You’re the nicest, kindest, prettiest smol I’ve ever seen.” Hot Rod held a raspberry up to Starscream’s lips. “I’ll even share my berries with you. See?”

“Want carrier,” Skydive repeated with a bit of a whine.

It gave Megatron the excuse he needed to walk away and not watch Hot Rod feed Starscream a raspberry. Or the way Starscream playfully nipped Hot Rod’s fingers.

“You four have fun,” Megatron said as he turned to leave, one hand cupping Skydive in case the hatchling lost his grip.

Hot Rod’s giggling seemed to chase him. To grip his ears and his core and try to grab him back. Megatron’s insides twisted with heat. He thought of Hot Rod lying beside him, curled with him, delicately feeding him berry by berry.

He shoved the mental image away and went in search of Whirl.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to add an additional warning this chapter for some non-graphic, off-screen, egg-laying. :)

Megatron never found opportunity to apologize to Hot Rod, perhaps because he deliberately did not seek the pretty smol out, and Hot Rod in turn, avoided him completely. Their brief conversation at the Welcoming notwithstanding, they truly had no reason to interact. Frenzy served as effective go-between while Orion was out for carry leave, and that, as they say, was that.

Perhaps it was better this way.

Megatron focused on his duties instead. They were, after all, the only thing which gave him purpose. And he was not a liege who shied away from the difficult work, the drudge work, the menial tasks even. If something needed to be done, and he was around to lend a hand, he did it.

Which was how he found himself becoming a pack mule for Perceptor's very heavy, very expensive lab equipment. Megatron didn't know what all it was for, only that it was a gift from the university, who'd updated their own equipment and had no need for this anymore. It made his scientists happy. That was the important thing.

"You can set that box on the floor there. I'll have Brainstorm unpack it later," Perceptor directed as he set his own, smaller crate on a table already groaning under the weight of several containers.

Megatron dropped the heavy box as delicately as he could. Still, something rattled inside, and Perceptor gave him a sharp look. Megatron ignored it. If he was going to complain about the quality of Megatron's service, he could haul the heavy crates himself.

Megatron groaned as he straightened, his spine giving a creak of protest. Megatron rubbed at his back with the heel of his hand. He would be spending a fair amount of time in the hot springs tonight. Could it be that he was getting old? He wasn't even half Ratchet's age, and the cranky medic was pretty spry.

Perhaps it was the stress.

"So happy that's the last of it," Megatron said. He hoped it didn't sound like a whine.

Perceptor huffed a laugh. "You're getting soft in your advanced years, my liege."

"You're older than me, Perceptor." A fact which sometimes galled Megatron. He was neither the oldest nor the wisest, the tallest nor the strongest, or even the most skilled of his flock. Yet, they still called him Liege.

"Ah, but I have a cute smol in my nest who will rub all the aches and pains out of my muscles later," the scientist replied with a smirk few thought him capable of. Perceptor was usually reserved, but

could be quite humorous in the right situation.

Megatron cast Perceptor a sharp look. "Not you, too."

By Adaptus, was there anyone in his flock who wasn't going to involve themselves in his love life or lack of one? Had they nothing better to do? Where was the frightened respect most flocks had for their leaders?

No. Scratch the latter. Megatron was glad they did not fear him. Still. He had to wonder.

"Your flock worries about you." Perceptor pulled out a pad of paper and made a notation on it as though cataloging his new toys. "Of course, we worry about Hot Rod, also."

Megatron's eyes narrowed. "Is that a lecture I hear building in your tone?" While Perceptor had foregone all offers to take a leadership position with Megatron, he still offered advice on occasion.

Unlike Ratchet, Megatron did not suspect Perceptor of being an ousted leader on his own. Perceptor did not like to lead. He did, however, have a keen mind for helpful advice. Perhaps he'd been an adviser in another life, scientific or otherwise.

Perceptor's pen scratched noisily over the paper. "For someone who's not interested in Hot Rod, you can't seem to stay away from him."

Megatron sighed. This again. Though if Orion had noticed, and Perceptor as well, it seemed likely they had a point. They were among the most observant members of Megatron's flock, excluding Rung. Now if Rung came to Megatron with the same concern, Megatron would have more to say than dismissal.

"We are both members of a small flock in a small aerie. That I am around him is purely by coincidence."

"Yes, of course." Perceptor flicked open a box and kept writing. "Which is why you were training him. Why you spoke to him privately. Why you engaged with him at the Welcoming and why you can hardly take your eyes from him anytime you are in a shared space. Not to mention the way your tail feathers start to twitch and your eyes darken in a most unseemly manner."

Ah. So his, uh, interest in Hot Rod had been noticed. A natural interest to be sure! But it was not helping his case. How could he prove he had no desire for Hot Rod when his own body betrayed him? When desire wasn't the problem?

Megatron gnawed on the inside of his cheek. He felt chastened, and the heat of it flooded his face.

Perceptor still didn't look at him. "You can't behave that way and expect him to believe you're not interested. It's contradictory at best and leading him on at worst."

"Leading him--" Megatron broke off, anger and irritation battling for control inside him as he spluttered. "I've told him quite clearly I'm not interested. How does that make me a tease?"

Perceptor arched a feathery eyebrow and looked up at him. "I didn't call you a tease, though interesting you'd use that word."

Megatron huffed. "You might as well have."

“Perhaps that’s because you’re aware of how inconsistent your behavior is.” Perceptor looked back down at his paper, pen moving as he counted. “From where I, and most of your flock are standing, it looks like you’re playing hard to get. No wonder he’s confused.”

Megatron folded his arms over his chest and exhaled. Perceptor was only stating something Megatron had already heard. He knew he was in part to blame. He felt drawn to Hot Rod. Attracted. He couldn’t deny it. And there was a part of him flattered by Hot Rod’s interest.

He wanted, so badly, to throw caution to the wind and accept Hot Rod’s courtship. But he also knew it would be unfair of him to do so. He couldn’t offer his core to Hot Rod when it still belonged to another. He couldn’t give Hot Rod the family he was sure the pretty smol wanted. He couldn’t be a proper mate to anyone.

“What do you suggest?” Megatron asked. He kept his tone soft and sincere. He needed advice.

“Keep your distance. Be polite but removed.” Perceptor circled around the table and peered into another box, his glasses glinting in the light of the lamps. “Delegate your concerns if you have any.”

Megatron scrubbed a hand down his face.

“Or you could make it easier on yourself and follow through with what you obviously want,” Perceptor said with a shrug. His tailfeathers swished across the floor. “The choice is yours.”

“You are singularly unhelpful.”

Perceptor slanted a look in Megatron’s direction. “No one can decide this for you. Or solve it for you. Now bring me that box, would you?”

He was always practical if nothing else.

Megatron sighed and stooped to pick up the box.

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Perceptor’s words lingered.

Megatron tried his best to abide by them. He kept his distance. He delegated. He made sure that only Frenzy and Rumble delivered papers between himself and Orion. He tasked Soundwave with keeping an eye on Hot Rod.

It would have to be enough.

Difficulties remained.

It was hard not to seek Hot Rod in the crowds. Harder still not to watch, to let his eyes linger on Hot Rod as he smiled or laughed, as he got closer to the others around him. Closer to Starscream. Closer to bars still looking for mates.

Knowing that Hot Rod wanted to court him and wanting to do so in return. Wanting to learn how Hot Rod tasted, the sounds he made. Admitting to himself, and only himself, that he missed Hot Rod teasing him, flirting with him, smiling at him.

Megatron didn't usually eat breakfast with his flock. Mostly because he couldn't manage to drag himself out of the nest in time. Early rising was not one of his favorite activities, and besides that, breakfast was always more of a buffet to graze rather than a communal meal.

This morning, he'd changed his routine and sought out his own breakfast. Megatron grabbed an oat muffin and freshly squeezed orange juice. He lingered by the doorway, watching his flock as they nibbled and set out for the day, as the Gathering team met to decide on a field to pluck, and the guards argued over who would have to watch over Hot Rod this time.

Hot Rod, apparently, made a habit of running out on his own, chasing after a sweet scent on the wind, and forgetting to inform the soldiers escorting him and the other Gatherers. Whether or not his forgetfulness was on purpose, the guards couldn't decide. Not all of them found it cute.

Bulkhead was on escort today. Given his camaraderie with Hot Rod, he ended up volunteering. Or being told to do so. Fortunately, Bulkhead didn't seem to mind. Especially not when Hot Rod coozied up to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. The large barabara flushed and ducked his head as if shy.

They were an ill match. Or maybe that was the jealousy talking.

Megatron bit into his muffin with a ferociousness it did not deserve. He chewed and swallowed what felt like a tasteless lump.

He felt a presence behind him, darkening the doorway before it slipped inside and lingered like a shadow just beyond Megatron's peripheral vision. He didn't have to look to know who it was. He'd missed Soundwave's wake-up call. No doubt his Speaker had come looking for him.

"Some things are easier said than done," Megatron murmured, just loud enough to be caught by the harpy behind him, but no other. He didn't have to clarify. Soundwave knew. Somehow, he always knew.

"Justification not necessary," Soundwave replied, equally quiet. There was an agreeing chirp, bright and cheerful. He had Laserbeak with him today then.

"It is very necessary." Megatron sighed and popped the last bit of the muffin into his mouth. He chewed, his gaze wandering over the crowd, but lingering on Hot Rod. "The problem is that I am attracted to him."

Feathers rustled. "There's an easy answer to that, boss," Laserbeak chirred.

"And your brother knows why there isn't." Megatron's fingers tightened around his cup, until it creaked stress at him. He quickly downed the orange juice and set the empty container aside, lest he break it.

Soundwave stepped closer, until he was warmth at Megatron's side, their feathers brushing. "You fear."

Megatron sighed. He tore his eyes away from Hot Rod and the jealousy broiling inside him. He had no right to feel it. "You know I do."

“He’s a good mate,” Soundwave said. “Good liege-consort.”

“Very good,” Laserbeak chirped in agreement.

Megatron’s lips quirked. “Are you giving me your approval?” Soundwave should join the club. It seemed everyone he spoke with was encouraging Megatron. Though Soundwave knew very well why Megatron shouldn’t.

Laserbeak crooned a soft musical note at him. “All of us are.”

Was he truly that pathetic?

Megatron found Hot Rod again. And again and again. As he always did. Eyes drawn back to Hot Rod smiling, laughing. The prettiest smol in the room, with his bright eyes and his brighter feathers. He was so much more than the surface. He was quick and intelligent and lovely, and everything Megatron didn’t know he could want outside of Orion. If there was someone he could see himself mating, someone who could fill the empty spaces left inside of him, that someone was Hot Rod.

He was everything Megatron could love, and what Megatron couldn’t have. Because there was no aerie, no flock, no harpy bara or smol, who’d want a mate as useless as Megatron.

He gnawed on his bottom lip. “I can’t.”

Soundwave rested a hand on his shoulder briefly. “I know,” he said, too soft for the usual rasp to affect his voice. “I also have news to report. Unless you’d rather stay--”

“No. There’s no reason for me to linger.” Megatron turned without a backward glance and faced his Speaker. “Do we need privacy for this news?”

“Not particularly.” On Soundwave’s shoulder, Laserbeak sat, her feet kicking playfully, but her eyes solemn and sympathetic as she watched Megatron.

“Should I be concerned?” Megatron slipped out of the dining hall, and Soundwave followed, falling into step beside him.

“Perhaps. There’s rumor of a military phalanx wandering nearby. They aren’t close enough to be a problem, but it’s suggested they’re looking for something.”

“Or someone,” Megatron murmured. “Who started the rumor?”

Soundwave clasped his hands behind his back, easily matching Megatron’s stride. Laserbeak sat on his shoulder, her balance impeccable as she leaned close to her brother’s ear and murmured to him occasionally.

“Our supplier in Ultrix passed the news along.”

“Any idea their aerie of origin?”

“No.”

Megatron considered. It could be nothing, or it could be something. He offered sanctuary to many

harpies who had fled their own flocks or aeries for breaking tradition or leaving their mates or fleeing a terrible fate. He had on at least one occasion refused search parties attempting to retrieve someone.

Any member of Megatron's flock was free to leave of their own accord anytime they wished. But he objected strongly to anyone attempting to remove one of Megatron's flock without their consent and by force. Megatron's flock was small, but they were fierce and strong. Megatron would die before letting any he protected come to harm.

"Assemble a team. Small. Sneaky. Able to defend themselves," Megatron said as they followed the downward curve of the path, not that Megatron had a particular destination in mind. "We need more information. I'm certain they are coming here, but I want to know why and for who."

Laserbeak kicked her feet again, mauve feathers fluttering around her ankles. "Done," she chirped.

"The flock will be safe," Soundwave agreed.

Megatron believed them. He trusted Soundwave.

This, at least, he could control. Could manage. His conflicting feelings and sense of helplessness were out of hand, but taking care of his flock... that Megatron could do. For now, it would have to be enough.

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Terradive went into labor first, laying his egg on a sunny afternoon with no complications and a much relieved Rotor at his side. Ratchet's crankiness had only reflected his own relief. Now all that remained was to wait for the little one to hatch. Only then would Terradive and Rotor be completely at ease.

Two days later, Radiance laid his egg in the middle of the night, the birth so fast and sudden Windfall hadn't even had chance to summon Ratchet. Radiance was going to be the envy of every first time carrier now. He'd barely felt a hint of pain.

Smols carried so much easier than baras, which was one of the reasons so many aeries forbade baras from doing so. It was almost unfair, how he'd laid without so much as a whimper.

Only Orion remained, and while he was serene as he waited, Shockwave was an agitated mess who paced and smothered Orion with pampering. Megatron lingered in the periphery, just as concerned, while Ratchet threatened to sedate them both if they didn't settle down. Megatron and Ratchet had nearly come to blows over that, as Megatron didn't like Ratchet's tone, and Ratchet didn't like being questioned about his medical expertise.

Orion, the most clear-headed of all four of them, had cut the argument in two with a well-placed, well-acted whimper. Megatron leapt to comfort him, he and Shockwave vying to bring Orion something – anything – to ease his discomfort. In the background, Ratchet rolled his eyes and muttered about nannying, but learned to hold his tongue.

Contractions hit Orion before breakfast at the end of the week. It was a toss up who was more

relieved: Orion or the three baras hovering around him. Ratchet tossed Megatron out on his arse, and even though Orion had gasped out that Megatron was more than welcome, there were already more hands than needed inside the nest.

Outside of it, Megatron remained. He paced in the corridor, back and forth, wearing a path in the woven branches. Sounds floated out to his ears: Ratchet's instructions, Shockwave's loving murmurs, Orion's little pained sounds of struggle. Megatron's core ached.

Orion wasn't the only bara to carry this year, but it was his first attempt. Which meant it was a toss up which of the carries had concerned Ratchet most: Terradive with his miscarries, or Orion with his first. His labor could last for hours. He simply wasn't built to lay as easily as the smols. His hips were too narrow, his instincts not as strong.

It was early yet. His aerie was starting to waken. Megatron knew he had other things he should do. Responsibilities. Breakfast, for one. But he couldn't bring himself to leave shouting distance, not so long as Orion labored. He would be too distracted with worry. He had to know Orion would be all right. He trusted Ratchet, but that was neither here nor there.

Megatron couldn't leave.

So he paced the corridor in front of Orion and Shockwave's nest, glad that they had one on the interior, where few could see Megatron's ruffled behavior. It was bad for morale for his flock to see him flustered. Tucked away in the back corner, he had something resembling privacy, so when he whirled on a tarsal talon to continue pacing, it startled him to nearly collide with someone.

Megatron grabbed at the newcomer, steadying him by the shoulders, and looked down into Hot Rod's bright blue eyes. Hot Rod had a soft smile on his lips, and he was carrying a basket, the top of it covered with a thin towel.

"We have to stop running into each other." Hot Rod laughed and stepped back, out from under Megatron's hands and out of reach. "Didn't realize how sneaky I was."

Megatron stared at him like he wasn't sure who he was looking at. His brain felt like it had misfired. Maybe because he was hungry. Maybe because he'd been dragged from a sound sleep to news both alarming and exciting. Maybe because he hadn't been this close to Hot Rod in weeks, and all the desire had come back in a flood.

Why did Hot Rod have to smell so good? Why did he have to be so pretty? Why did his laugh have to linger in Megatron's ears, sending a warmth down his spine?

"Soundwave said you might be hungry," Hot Rod continued, his tone a little uneasy. He held up the basket and flipped back the towel, revealing an assortment of pastries and fruit inside – many of which were Megatron's favorites. "He's busy filling in for you. He asked me to bring this."

In other words, Hot Rod wouldn't have done so if he hadn't been asked. As if his appearance here offended Megatron.

He was to blame for that. He'd treated Hot Rod like a leper or an outcast and now Hot Rod behaved as if he were unwanted. The unease in his body language made the guilt heavier.

Soundwave should have known better than to send Hot Rod. Just what was his Speaker thinking? Why hadn't he sent one of his brothers? Someone who wasn't the cause of Megatron's many

sleepless nights?

Megatron swallowed over the lump in his throat. "Thank you," he said as he accepted the basket. "It's a nice gesture."

Hot Rod shrugged and rubbed the back of his head. He looked away, to Orion's curtained door and the noise behind it. "Can't have our liege going hungry, you know."

"A missed meal won't hurt me," Megatron said in a mild tone. He peered into the basket before he pulled out an apple tart. "Have you eaten?"

Hot Rod chuckled. "Yeah. That's all for you. I don't know how long you're going to be here, so that should last you until dinner." He tucked his hands behind his back. "There's a bottle of water in there, too."

Thoughtful indeed.

Megatron lowered himself down to the wall just to the left of Orion's door, setting the basket beside him. He dug out the water and tried to make himself eat, despite the anxiety gnawing at his belly.

"Thank you," he repeated. He winced as a particularly loud groan sent a shiver of worry down his spine.

Hot Rod shuffled his feet, his feathers drifting down, clamping around his body. "Can I bring you anything else or...?"

Megatron looked up at him and fought down the urge to ask for company. He didn't want to mislead Hot Rod. "No, thank you. I should be fine."

"Are you sure?" Indecision rippled over Hot Rod's face. "You don't look like I should leave you alone, and Soundwave kind of hinted that I shouldn't."

Megatron wondered what kind of expression he had to make Hot Rod worry like that. He swallowed down the sigh before he could let it emerge. Soundwave should stop trying to play matchmaker.

"I'm sure." Megatron picked at the apple tart, flakes of golden crust fluttering into his lap. "There's nothing I can do here but wait anyway."

A long cry warbled from the room behind them. It was thus followed by a shout and Ratchet saying something Megatron couldn't make out through the roar in his ears. He leapt to his feet, basket forgotten and ducked under the curtain without second thought. Worry crested high inside of him. If something had happened to Orion...

"You did great," Ratchet was saying, his tone gentle for once as he held a cup of water to Orion's lips. He crouched beside the raised, rumpled nest-berth, looking fatigued, but composed.

Orion was within reach on the nest-berth, his body cradled by Shockwave's embrace. Shockwave nuzzled the back of his head as he crooned a low, soft song Megatron had never heard before. It was almost like a lullaby.

Orion looked exhausted, his feathers limp and his body equally so. But he cradled a gooey mass against his belly, and through his fingers and the stickiness, Megatron could see the firm oval-shape

of an egg.

Orion was fine. Obviously tired, but fine.

Relief whooshed out of Megatron on a long breath, and Orion looked up just then, noticing Megatron right away. He swallowed another sip of water and managed a smile for Megatron as Ratchet stood and moved aside, taking the cup with him.

“You’re still here,” Orion said, his voice crackling the rasp of the exhausted.

“Of course I am.” Megatron knelt by Orion’s side, taking Ratchet’s place. He was careful not to jostle Orion, who had to be hurting. “How are you feeling?”

“Exhausted. Achy. Triumphant.” One of Orion’s hands slid away, allowing Megatron to see the egg.

It was beautiful, of course. The swirl of pale blue and green decorating the shell gave hint to the harpy growing within. It didn’t always hold true, but more often than not, shell-color became full-adult hue. It was tiny, too. Tinier than an egg carried and borne by a smol, but Megatron could see none of the usual signs of weakness or illness.

The egg was perfect.

Megatron sagged with relief. “Congratulations.” He held up a hand, fingers curled inward, gesturing to the egg. “May I?”

“Of course,” Shockwave murmured. His head nudged against Orion’s, his hand gentle where it stroked Orion’s side. “You’re his godsire after all.”

Godsire. It was perhaps the closest he would ever get to a hatchling of his own.

Megatron curved his fingers around the bare patch of egg, feeling the heat and pulse of the life within. The corebeat was strong and vibrant. The little one had the strength of his parents, if not more.

“He will be beautiful,” Megatron murmured before he retracted his hand. He looked up at Ratchet. “How is he really?”

The older bara grunted. Fatigue made his feathers look dull and lifeless, limp as they draped over his body. He’d been on call all week and had delivered two eggs already. Small wonder. Once again, Megatron wondered if it was possible to recruit more healers to join their ranks.

Eventually Kaon would be too large for Ratchet to manage on his own.

“As he said,” Ratchet replied as he swiped at his hands with a towel and gave Megatron a sardonic smile. “Tired and aching, but I’m not seeing any damage. No sign of blood or tearing. Textbook delivery, I’d say.”

“Told you I’d be fine,” Orion said, though it didn’t have as much energy behind it as it should. He slumped tiredly in Shockwave’s arms, shoulders sinking, hands curving more firmly around his egg.

“I can’t help but worry.” Megatron couldn’t hide the fondness in his tone.

Luckily, he didn't have to. He might never admit how much he loved Orion, but it was safe to show his affection. They were as brothers after all, if nothing else.

Shockwave chuckled. "Our liege worries over everyone." He nuzzled Orion again and let out a soft sigh of fatigue. "Though you do need your rest, love. We've only a week before our little one is no longer immobile and quiet."

"That's the truth," Ratchet grunted. He gathered up his supplies into a basket and turned toward the door. "I prescribe lots of rest and food. You're both going to need your strength. I'll come by now and again to check on you."

"Thank you, Ratchet." Shockwave reached over Orion, resting his hand on the egg still cradled against Orion's belly.

The doctor tipped his head. "You're welcome." He moved to pass Megatron and paused, something knowing in his eyes. He looked like he wanted to say something before he shook his head and moved on, departing with a swish through the closed curtain.

"Can I bring you anything?" Megatron asked of the exhausted couple. They wouldn't be leaving to retrieve anything for themselves anytime soon.

"I think we're covered." Shockwave gestured to the overflowing basket of food nearby, and the pitcher of water next to it. "Thank you though."

Megatron nodded. "You're welcome. Orion, don't worry about your duties, they will be handled. Shockwave, I have Perceptor keeping an eye on your experiments."

The two mates smiled at him with thanks, but Megatron could tell he was losing their attention. Fatigue infected both of them, and they'd started nuzzling one another, lost in their mutual affection.

Megatron excused himself while his core squeezed into a tight ball, happiness and regret tangling into a knot in his belly. He stepped out of Shockwave and Orion Pax's nest with too many emotions to define.

Hot Rod was gone, but he'd left the basket and water behind. His presence had only added to the tangle.

A wave of something, loneliness and regret perhaps, swept through Megatron. He stooped to gather up the basket, a physical example of Hot Rod's kindness. Even if had been under Soundwave's direction.

It was hard to tell which was the heaviest regret these days: the unrequited love for Orion, or the affection he could never enjoy with Hot Rod.

Chapter 9

A few days later, Ravage came and fetched Megatron out of the library where he'd been taking refuge from the work stacked on his office desk. It could very well keep until the eggs hatched, and Megatron could greet the new arrivals to his flock. Besides, Orion wasn't available to pester him into working on it.

The library was small, intimate, and growing by the years. The university humans had gifted them with most of their collection. Perceptor bought others. Newly arrived harpies brought books and scrolls with them. Some were written in dialects Megatron couldn't read. He appreciated the diversity, however. It was what he wanted for his flock.

"Is someone hatching?" Megatron asked as soon as he sensed Ravage's presence, since spotting Ravage was nearly impossible.

Ravage was almost solid-black and the darkest smol in Megatron's aerie. He was sub-adult as well, but Megatron had no doubt once he reached maturity, there would be many vying to court him.

"No. The Raptors are here." Ravage slinked around without making noise. The odd and occasional habit of walking quadrupedal probably had something to do with it. "Grimlock wants to talk to you."

Megatron snapped his book shut and slipped it back onto the shelf. He hadn't been reading it so much as he'd been trying to suss out the language. "Does he seem agitated?"

"He's got a mate."

Megatron raised an eyebrow as he looked at Ravage. "Beg pardon?"

Ravage cracked a smile. His teeth looked bright against the inky black of his feathers. "Pretty little thing. Not a Raptor."

"Huh." Even Grimlock could get a mate. Clearly, the world had changed. "Well, best not to keep him waiting."

"No. Not that one." Ravage chuckled, low and raspy though it was, and slunk out of the room ahead of Megatron. He vanished that quickly, though how he did so in full daylight, Megatron had yet to figure.

Outside the library, Megatron finally caught the noise at the ground floor. A fair number of his flock had assembled, especially some of the newer residents who were no doubt curious about the Raptors. They were an unusual bunch and rarely interacted with their feathered kin. Unsurprisingly, things were different in Kaon.

Less feather than flesh and scale, harpy Raptors better resembled feathered reptiles rather than birds. They ate meat and preferred to be nomadic. They were a small group and no one counted them as flock or aerie.

Pack, Megatron decided, was the better term. This particular one was only four in number, five if Grimlock had truly taken a mate. There were other groups of Raptors but Megatron had never met

any of them as Grimlock's pack were the only Raptors locally. Most Raptors kept to themselves, both out of preference and because their feathered kin weren't very welcoming.

Megatron dropped into a glide to reach the ground floor, landing with a soft thump between the cluster of Raptors near the main entrance, and the clump of his own flock. He recognized no few faces, including Hot Rod's, among the crowd. Soundwave was here as well, though he stepped up beside Megatron in a united front.

"Good afternoon, Grimlock," Megatron said, careful to keep his tone pleasant as he greeted the Raptor leader with a tip of his head.

Grimlock was larger than him, bulkier as well, but Megatron refused to be intimidated by him. Even with the longer, sharper talons and teeth better suited for rending and tearing. He'd wondered on more than one occasion who would be the victor if Grimlock ever challenged him. Megatron had training, but Grimlock had sheer ferocity.

"Afternoon," Grimlock rumbled. His head barely dipped, a minor concession of respect. It was the most Megatron had managed to win from him.

His pack-mates clustered behind him, Sludge even larger than Grimlock, Slag and Snarl. There was another, just behind Grimlock, but visible still, and all the more noticeable. In a sea of golds, browns, and reds, this harpy was a bright, feathered purple. He was quite clearly a smol, where Megatron knew the Raptors did not have such classes. He was obviously not a Raptor at all.

"Welcome to Kaon," Megatron said. He was curious as to where Grimlock had found his pretty smol. "You're here to trade as usual, I assume?"

"You right." Grimlock's speech could use work, but the Raptors had a language of their own, and had only consented to learn a more common tongue to better communicate. "You have supplies. Me have information." He spoke the last word slowly, sounding out each syllable.

"Information," Soundwave repeated from Megatron's right, Frenzy standing next to him. The little subadult had his arms folded as he planted a look on his face that suggested he wasn't afraid. Though that didn't stop him from inching closer to his brother's side.

"I assume you have a list?" Megatron asked.

Snarl stepped forward, handing over a scrap of paper with a messy scrawl on it. "This list," he grunted as Frenzy danced forward to snatch it from his fingers.

Frenzy held it up to Megatron, allowing him to read it, though it would be Frenzy and his brothers' task to gather the items. Megatron squinted at the list, mentally comparing the request to what they had in stock and could spare. It was one of many reasons Orion insisted he be aware of their supply status.

"I can spare everything but the solar batteries. I can only offer half," Megatron said as he finished skimming the list. "The rest is manageable." He looked up at Grimlock. "Did you want access to our hot springs this time?"

"Hot springs?" The purple smol perked up, his amber eyes going big and round, before he grasped onto Grimlock's arm and gave it a gentle tug. "Oh, please, can we? I haven't had a hot bath in ages."

He looked up at Grimlock, all pleading and pretty, his feathers splayed attractively, a purr in his voice. Hot Rod had often done much the same to Megatron. It was a common tactic from a smol who knew how difficult to resist they could be.

What flock had this one come from, Megatron wondered. He was far too bold to be Vosian. Polyhex perhaps? Polyhexians were rumored to be hierarchical, with smols holding only the highest positions. Except Polyhex was a fair distance from here. Not a flight easily managed, especially for a lone smol. As of right now, Megatron did not house a single smol from Polyhex.

Grimlock ducked his head, his crest drooping. “Not have enough trade,” he murmured.

Purple feathers flattened and drooped. The happy cant to his lips turned into a pout as the smol pressed against Grimlock’s side. “Oh.”

Megatron’s core gave a little twinge of sympathy. His liege instincts rose up, demanding that he soothe and comfort.

“There’s no need to trade for such a thing,” Megatron said as he clasped his hands behind his back, trying his best to project a nonchalant air that spoke of kindness rather than charity. “It’s a natural resource so we’ve decided it is one to be shared freely.”

It was a new principle. One Megatron just now decided needed to be put into place. Luckily, of all those present, only Soundwave could call him out on the fib, and he wouldn’t.

Besides, neither Megatron nor his instincts could bear to see the pretty thing so disappointed. As amber eyes lit up with joy, Megatron knew he had made the right choice.

“Then can we?” The smol slid a hand – talons blunt, definitely not Raptor at all – over Grimlock’s arm. He pressed closer, the length of his body molded against Grimlock’s side, his voice becoming liquid and warm. “We can share one.”

That was one such invitation no interested harpy could ignore. It seemed Raptors were no different.

Grimlock’s eyes darkened with heat. “We can,” he rumbled before he seemed to remember where he was again, and his gaze shifted to Megatron. “With your permission.”

Behind him, Snarl and Slag snorted and jostled each other, giving their leader knowing looks. Amazingly, there didn’t seem to be a bit of jealousy in their gazes. Did they all... share the pretty one?

Megatron’s thoughts stalled on that. He didn’t want to contemplate it. All four Raptors outmassed their feathered companion. He was very much a rose among thorns.

Megatron coughed to hide the abrupt and worrisome thought. “You’re welcome here,” he said with a planted smile. “Your usual rooms are clean and ready for use.”

The Raptors came by often enough that Megatron had set aside a few nests for their use. But he also kept several unoccupied nests on the ground floor for visitors. They didn’t have many, but there were occasionally curious harpies who came without the intention to stay.

Spies, sometimes, too. Megatron welcomed them all the same. He had nothing to hide. He trusted

Soundwave would keep a close watch on them.

The purple smol tugged on Grimlock's arm again and snuggled into his shoulder. "Thank you for the offer!" he chirped and grinned brightly. "I'm Misfire, by the way. I'm new."

Megatron grinned despite himself. There was something very disarming about Misfire. "I gathered as much. Pleasure to meet you, Misfire." He dipped his head. "Welcome to the Kaon flock."

Grimlock rumbled deep in his chest, a sound no feathered harpy could make as it was closer to a growl. "Misfire mine."

Misfire made a noise of delight and leaned harder against Grimlock, nuzzling his shoulder with a rub of his head. His pale grey face bloomed with a blush of heat.

Megatron had to bury his amusement, lest he offend. "No one is questioning your claim, Grimlock." He swallowed down his grin. "Now what of this information you promised me?"

The Raptor leader blinked slowly, like a predator considering prey, before he straightened. He barked something over his shoulder in that odd, guttural language of theirs. Slag hissed in return, shooting Megatron a hostile look.

Misfire pouted and his shoulders slumped. "Aw, do I have to?"

"Yes." Grimlock nuzzled Misfire's face in a distinctly possessive move. He said something that made Misfire preen.

"Fine." Misfire rose up to press a kiss to Grimlock's cheek. "But if you don't hurry, I'm going to start without you."

With that promise, Misfire flounced away from Grimlock and slung his arm through Snarl's, dragging the Raptor after Slag and Sludge who had started to drift toward their rooms. Again, Megatron wondered if they all shared Misfire. Or was it merely a case of the flockmembers caring for their leader's mate?

Megatron's flock parted to make room for them, leaving only Grimlock behind, hopefully to share the information he carried. Grimlock often came across important things Megatron needed to know, since he roamed the far reaches of Kaon.

Megatron supposed he owed Grimlock the same courtesy of privacy. He turned toward his flock. "All right, everyone. Back to your duties."

Most obeyed immediately. A few lingered, but scattered after Megatron gave them a firm look. Soundwave remained, Frenzy at his side, which Megatron had expected. Hot Rod stuck around as well, which Megatron did not expect.

"You, too, Hot Rod," he said.

Hot Rod grinned and bounced closer to him. "This is my duty," he chirped, hands clasped behind his back, feathers twitching cheerfully. "I'm subbing for Orion remember?"

Frag.

Megatron sighed and rubbed his palm over his face. “Fine. Just... be quiet. And don’t interrupt.”

“My lips are sealed, boss.” Hot Rod mimed drawing his fingers over his lips and put his hand behind his back again. He bounced on his tarsals.

Someone had been spending far too much time in Frenzy and Rumble’s company. He was picking up on their idiosyncrasies.

Megatron turned back toward Grimlock. “You said you had information?”

The large Raptor nodded and moved closer, looming over the three Kaon harpies, though Megatron doubted it was intentional.

“There strange harpies in area,” Grimlock rumbled. He grimaced. “Since two, mebbe three weeks end of mating season.”

Curiously, it aligned with Starscream’s arrival to Kaon. Were the two perhaps related? Had someone come looking for Starscream? It wouldn’t be the first time. Now might be prudent for Megatron to remind his guards of how they were expected to handle potential threats.

“We’ve heard those rumors.” Having more than one credible source, however, meant Megatron should upgrade these strange harpies from rumor to potential danger. “We have a scouting party attempting to track them now. You’ve seen them?”

“Yes.” Grimlock’s growl deepened. He crossed his arms over his chest. Thick, ridged scars gave testament to many a fierce battle. “They armed. Have armor. Carry banner. Blue and silver.”

Blue and silver. Megatron frowned. That wasn’t much to go on. Many of the larger Aeries used blue and silver in their flags. Soundwave might know better. Or someone from Megatron’s flock might recognize the banner of their home aerie. It would be prudent to ask around.

“How many?” Megatron asked.

“Half-dozen.” Grimlock grinned, bearing razor-sharp teeth, perfect for rending flesh. “Easy prey. If wanted.”

Megatron shook his head, amused despite himself. “There’s no need to get violent yet. We don’t know what they want. Best to avoid conflict if at all possible.”

Grimlock snorted and shifted his weight, muscles rippling where scales were more visible than feathers. “No fun.”

“I merely prefer to think ahead,” Megatron said, unwilling to rise to the bait. He refused to get manipulated into another sparring match with Grimlock.

They’d both come out of it worse for wear. While Grimlock had laughed off the blood and damage and eventual scars, Megatron had been forced to endure Ratchet’s ire. And nothing was worth the rage of his doctor.

“Where were they?” Megatron asked.

Grimlock tilted his head, his forehead crinkling as he thought. “Near Tarn border. Maybe avoiding

Tarn? Not sure. Heading west.”

Toward Uraya, perhaps. Or straight toward Kaon’s aerie, if they took a more direct path.

“What else?” Frenzy asked. He still clutched the paper list. “You gotta know more than some random harpies wanderin’ about.”

Grimlock grunted. “Do,” he said, and unfolded his arms, his eyes narrowing. “Humans skulking around, too. Lots. Not kids. Not scientists.”

The Raptors of Kaon were well aware of those who were associated with the university. They knew what to look for, just as the university students and teachers knew what to carry to identify themselves as friend to nearby harpies.

“So not from the university.” Megatron’s frown deepened. This was troublesome indeed.

There were reasons the harpies feared humans. Slave trade was only part of it. Some of the humans had odd ideas about what harpy biology could do for them. Myth and magic. Detestable, really.

Megatron knew his aerie was particularly vulnerable because of its small size. He did not have an army to call upon if they were attacked. They always had the option to fall back or flee to the university for sanctuary, but not all of his flock would make it. There would be casualties.

“Slavers?” Soundwave guessed, and his tone was dark. His hands formed into tight fists at his side.

Megatron rested a hand on his Speaker’s shoulder, silently comforting. The scars on Soundwave’s throat attested to his hatred of humans. They’d fought free of such attempts to cage them before, and saved Laserbeak and Buzzsaw in the process.

“Probably.” Grimlock’s eyes darkened. “Can kill those, yeah?”

Megatron didn’t particularly care for the safety of human slavers. But he worried about consequences. If harpies started killing humans, no matter how vile they were, the humans might retaliate. It wouldn’t matter that the harpies had been victims to start.

“Not around Kaon,” he finally answered, and slid his hand free of Soundwave’s shoulder. The other flocks were large enough they could defend themselves. Megatron couldn’t afford that risk. “I don’t need trouble.”

Grimlock barked a laugh. “Still no fun.” He rocked back on his tarsal talons, his scales fluffing up as though to make him appear bigger. “That all information. Snarl got trade stuff. Swap later?”

Frenzy cackled. “Eager to get to that pretty mate of yours?” He leaned forward with an amused grin on his face. Bold smol.

Grimlock, however, only grinned. “Misfire mine.”

“Trade later,” Megatron confirmed, if only because the lust in Grimlock’s eyes was making him jealous. Misfire was quite pretty. “Go. Enjoy the springs. And your mate.”

Grimlock’s smile was all predatory teeth. “I will.”

He strutted off without a care in the world, shoulders proud. No doubt he'd grab Misfire and take him to the hot springs. Megatron made a mental note not to go anywhere near said springs for the rest of the day. The last thing he needed was a spike of envy to go with everything else.

"The scouts check in tonight," Soundwave said once they were alone. "I'll direct them toward Tarn. See what they can find."

Megatron nodded. "Good." He shifted his gaze to Hot Rod, whose brow had drawn tight and his gaze elsewhere. "Something wrong, Hot Rod?"

The smol blinked and looked up. "What? Oh. No. Sorry. I was thinking." He grinned sheepishly and rubbed the back of his head. "Should we be worried about the humans?"

"Of course not. But it never hurts to be prepared and cautious." Megatron tried to offer a reassuring smile, even though Hot Rod's expression remained somewhat distant. "Though I do think it's a good idea to remind everyone of the safety rules." He'd bring it up at the communal meal tonight.

"Yeah. That's good." Hot Rod audibly sighed and chewed on his bottom lip. "You think these... mysterious harpies are going to be trouble?"

"Only one way to find out!" Frenzy chirped as he climbed up his brother's body and perched on Soundwave's shoulder like a too-big parrot. "Might just have to invite them in for a chat."

Megatron pinched the bridge of his nose. "Frenzy."

"A friendly chat!" the sub-adult corrected, his eyes sparkling, and his grin the very picture of innocence. One Megatron did not believe for an instant.

Megatron bit back a sigh. "It doesn't matter why they've come. Kaon is my Aerie, and my flock, and no one is leaving if they don't want to. That's all there is to it."

"That's good to know," Hot Rod said, but he didn't look relieved. If anything, he seemed even more pensive than before, lower lip getting puffy from repeated gnawing, and his feathers drawn tight against his body.

Megatron, however, wouldn't push. He'd learned better by now. He made a mental note to have Soundwave look into it. Perhaps something in Hot Rod's past made him fear soldiers or mysterious strangers.

"Me and bro will start making plans, boss." Frenzy patted Soundwave on the head like the little brat he was. The paper crinkled in his free hand.

Megatron wouldn't have caught Soundwave's aggrieved sigh if he hadn't been listening for it. "I know you'll get the job done."

Frenzy beamed. Behind his mask, Soundwave might have been smiling, not that Megatron would know it.

Soundwave launched into the air, Frenzy shrieking with glee as he clung to his brother's shoulder. They headed for the upper levels, where Soundwave's office was tucked away in a back corner, difficult to find. Paranoid, Soundwave was. Megatron couldn't blame him.

Hot Rod remained, still fidgeting, his eyes turned in the direction Grimlock and his pack had gone. Megatron couldn't identify the look on his face, save that something about it troubled him.

"You did well," Megatron said, because good behavior – especially on Hot Rod's part – always deserved recognition. "Filling in for Orion, I mean."

"I'm more than just a pretty face." Hot Rod gave him an exaggerated wink and a toss of his head, causing the fire-bright of his feathers to catch a ray of sunlight. Whatever was bothering him seemed to vanish from his face. "But don't worry. Won't be long now before Orion will be back on duty and back doing what he's good at."

Megatron raised an eyebrow. "Are you trying to say that you're doing a poor job as substitute? Because that would be inaccurate from where I'm standing."

Hot Rod blinked. His mouth opened and closed. He stared at Megatron before he managed a huff of a laugh. "Wow. Two compliments in one day. I must be dreaming."

"You don't think you deserve them?"

"I think it's weird to hear them from you." Hot Rod's lips curved at the corner, more a smirk than a smile. He crossed his arms, flame-colored feathers forming a curtain around him. "Getting sentimental in your old age?"

Megatron snorted. "Hardly. I simply give credit when it's due."

"Right." Hot Rod dragged out the syllables and rolled his eyes. "I'll keep that in mind." He tilted his head and looked up at Megatron. "The eggs are going to hatch any day now, aren't they?"

An odd non-sequitor.

"That would be my assumption. Why?"

Hot Rod's gaze wandered away. "No reason. Just an observation." He rocked back and forth on his tarsals. "More little ones in the Cradle. It'll be nice. Every new fledge for the flock, right?"

"Right." Megatron stared at Hot Rod, feeling like there was something he was missing in this conversation. He just couldn't pinpoint what it was. Nor did he want to assume because he'd done quite enough of that lately. "And what about you?"

Hot Rod blinked and actually looked startled. "What about me what?"

"Are you..." Megatron fought for a definition that didn't sound patronizing or jealous. What he settled for somehow came across as both. "Have you found anyone of interest?"

Hot Rod stared at him. Not with shock, but something else. If anything, he grew even more tense.

"No," he finally said, his tone tight and guarded. A muscle in his jaw jumped. "I'm not sure you understand how feelings work, my liege." And that sounded mocking. "You can't just turn them on and off as the situation calls for it. You, of all people, should know that."

Megatron frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?" Would he ever have a conversation with Hot Rod without it turning to this?

An audible sigh escaped Hot Rod. He dropped his arms. He looked older all of a sudden. Tired, too. "Nothing. Never mind."

"I am not going to ignore this." Megatron held a hand to his head, feeling an ache coming on. "I want you to be happy, Hot Rod. It worries me that you aren't."

"Well, my happiness is my problem and not yours," the smol retorted, bitterness seeping into his tone. "It'd be a lot easier on both of us if you'd just save your concern."

Megatron twisted his jaw. Hurt and anger all but bled off Hot Rod in waves, and the light tone from earlier was gone as if burnt away.

"I would not have made you happy," he said, quietly in case anyone was eavesdropping. Couldn't Hot Rod see that Megatron only wanted what was best?

"And I'm absolutely delighted you decided that for me," Hot Rod spat, his eyes flashing blue fire. "Spare me your patronizing."

Megatron sighed and scrubbed harder at his forehead. "I actually didn't intend to start a fight."

"Funny how it always turns out that way." A small growl echoed in Hot Rod's chest, his hands drawing into a tight fist. "I don't enjoy this either, no matter what you might think. Rejection is not fun."

"It's not supposed to be," Megatron muttered, but he wasn't sure if he meant for Hot Rod to hear it or not. He'd never been rejected, because he'd never put himself out there. His imagination, however, had always supplied more than enough detail. "For what it's worth, I apologize."

"For what? You've said your piece, and I've said mine." Hot Rod's shoulders rolled in a shrug. "We both know where we stand."

On shaky ground. Megatron didn't feel any more conviction than he did before he let Hot Rod smile at him. Every decision he'd made in this regard still felt uncertain. His kindness was only a cruelty.

"It would be nice to be friends at least," Megatron said.

Hot Rod barked a laugh. "I don't know, my liege. I think that's pushing it." He half-turned away from Megatron, his gaze distant. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I always land on my feet."

"I am Liege. It's my duty to worry."

"Duty," Hot Rod repeated and his tailfeathers flicked. "I know a little something about that."

Somehow, Megatron got the feeling Hot Rod didn't mean substituting for Orion. There was an echo of The Past in his words, as well as the distance in his eyes. It made Megatron want to pull him close, hug him tightly, stroke his back, tell him things could change, that it would be all right, even though he knew it was a lie.

Hot Rod went stiff suddenly. "Oh, Grimlock came back out," he said. "I just remembered I have to ask him something. We're done here, right?" He started backing up without waiting for a response, an eagerness in his body language that had been lacking.

Megatron's brow crinkled. "You're sure you're all right?"

Hot Rod grinned, blinding and insincere. "Never better." He winked, a parody of the flirtatious behavior he used to display. "Give me a chance, and I can actually show you."

If Megatron hadn't known better, he'd think Hot Rod had never been upset at all.

Megatron groaned. "Go." He flicked a hand and watched Hot Rod tip his head in a barely present bow before scampering off, tail swishing behind him.

He sidled up to Misfire first, a wise move. Grimlock wouldn't see Hot Rod as a challenge, and he'd be less twitchy for a smol to approach his mate. From this distance, Megatron couldn't hear what they were saying. It wasn't any of his business anyway, and it wasn't like he had reason to be jealous. Grimlock already had a mate.

But then, unless they shared, his three packmates didn't. What better way to avoid a broken core than to take a lover outside of your flock, where you were nearly guaranteed to never see the unrequited love again? What if that was Hot Rod's intention? What if seeing Misfire had given him an idea?

Megatron frowned and spun away, emotions gnawing at his gut until he wrestled them into a neat, contained ball. One he could bury deep.

It wasn't his business. If Hot Rod wanted to leave, Megatron had no right to stop him. No harpy was bound to the Kaon flock. It was their right to choose the path to their own happiness.

Hot Rod certainly deserved his.

Megatron couldn't give it to him. Therefore, it was none of his business however Hot Rod chose to find it.

None at all.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

coughs

Friendly reminder that this fic is rated NSFW and M.

beaming smile

It took five hours and thirty-three exhausting, tense minutes for Terradive and Rotor's egg to hatch once the first crack started. The little hatchling fought to break free, frightening his parents with every push and crack. They clutched each other and watched with bated breath, struggling not to help while Megatron struggled not to physically restrain them.

Ratchet reassured them constantly, but the fear in their eyes was palpable. They'd already lost so many. Not this one, too. Not again.

A dark ball of fluff with bright green eyes finally clawed his way free of the shell, making weak chirping sounds and reaching for something familiar. Terradive was the first to scoop him up, gooey mess and all, cooing as he held the little one up to his cheek. Rotor wrapped around him like a second pair of wings. The hatchling made louder, more robust chirps.

"He's going to be strong," Ratchet commented with a sigh that could only be relief. He'd been as anxious for Rotor and Terradive's hatchling as they had been.

"His name is Skyshadow." Rotor brushed the pad of his thumb over the hatchling's head, his expression soft and warm. "After my grandsire."

"A good name," Megatron said. "Very good. Congratulations. He's beautiful."

A pang of jealousy was quickly swallowed. It had no place here. Megatron might never have a hatchling of his own, but that was no reason to be envious. Did he not have an entire flock to look after? Did they not help one another raise their young? It was more than enough. To crave anything else was greedy.

Megatron excused himself, leaving Ratchet behind to offer instructions in the care and feeding of their little blessing. It was up to Megatron to share the news with the rest of the flock.

Excitement filled the aerie. The first hatchling of the season! And two more to come! Every addition to their flock was to be celebrated, especially the little ones.

Glee came in far too many flavors. There was talk of festivity, smaller than the Welcoming but equally engaging. The meal preppers chattered to each other about treats and small bites. The brewers shared conspiratorial looks.

Megatron didn't bother to try and tone down the fervor. They were a small flock, a small aerie. Any reason to celebrate was a good one. Especially this particular reason. Little by little, his flock grew in

number. He was grateful to Adaptus for such a blessing.

Radiance and Windfall's egg hatched a day later, after a thirty-five minute struggle that was nearly a record for shortest hatching. The current record was held by Sunspot, who'd hatched so quickly, Sunstorm wondered if his little one had teleported out of the shell, so eager he'd been to greet the world.

An energetic and brightly colored hatchling stumbled out of his shell, already chirping noisily and wriggling his barely functional arms. Short fluff already displayed the hints of the rainbow like coloration the hatchling would later bloom. He would be smol by birth for sure. But whatever else he'd like to be remained to be seen.

Radiance and Windfall were utterly delighted, even as they shared an understanding glance. To have a child so energetic out of the shell, they were sure to be kept on their toes in the future. Their little one would be a handful and a half.

"His name is Nova." Radiance cupped the squirming hatchling in his hands, his little mouth open wide as he announced a hunger he felt no one was addressing fast enough.

"Thank Adaptus we'll have help," Windfall breathed as he hurriedly mashed a paste of water and berries and thin rice. "I can already tell he's going to be the work of three hatchlings at once."

Megatron laughed. "You're probably right. But never fear. You have an entire aerie out there, eager to greet your little one and lend a hand whenever you need it."

Windfall and Radiance cast him identical, grateful looks before their clicking hatchling demanded their attention once more. Nova started wriggling in his carrier's hand. Such advanced movement so soon! They had a little prodigy, didn't they?

Megatron excused himself, announced the new hatching to his flock, and watched the excitement double in intensity. Windfall and Radiance wanted to observe the traditions of their home aerie. They preferred the two-week period of isolation to bond with their hatchling and minimal contact with the flock.

Megatron intended to honor their wishes. Though he suspected they'd break long before the two weeks were up. Nova would ensure that.

Megatron chuckled to himself.

The only holdout was Orion and Shockwave's egglet. Which meant the hatching could start any hour now.

They only had to wait. But not for long, as it turned out.

When the first crack showed, the entire aerie went into a frenzy of activity. The ground floor was cleared out, tables were dragged in and food was spread out across them, all prepared for the last celebration of this year's mating season. For Skyshadow, for Nova, and for Shockwave and Orion's unnamed egglet, currently hatching.

Megatron left his flock to it, Soundwave nominally in charge with Hot Rod present to oversee, acting in Orion's stead. With Soundwave's siblings delivering messages and shepherding the party organizers, Megatron had nothing to worry about. The festivities were in good hands.

He could go where he was most needed, sitting beside an anxious Orion and Shockwave as they watched their little one struggle to free himself from the confines of his shell. They hovered around the egg, Orion having to hold himself back from physically assisting the hatchling. Megatron sat a little further away, still present, but too far to interfere with the hatchling's bonding to his parents.

It also kept him out of direct sight of Orion and Shockwave, as Megatron wrestled with his own feelings. This moment was one of joy and sorrow, as if it was the final stitch in a tapestry of love that left Megatron on the outside, while Orion and Shockwave were woven together forever.

Megatron had never held any illusions of stealing Orion from Shockwave. He'd never intended to try. Orion was happy with Shockwave, and the thought had never crossed his mind to disrupt that. Orion's happiness had been the only thing Megatron had truly wanted without question.

But this.

This right here.

This was the reason he'd never tried courting Orion, even before Shockwave entered the picture, when he thought there might have been the slightest chance Orion might love him in return. This was the reason he held back from taking the remotest chance Orion might reciprocate his feelings. This, right here, was the one thing he couldn't give Orion, the reason he couldn't confess, why he'd never given Orion an opportunity to reject him. This beautiful, wonderful new life currently trying to free himself of his shell.

It was agonizing to watch the spread of each tiny crack. To hear the scrabble and struggle of the little one within. To see a peek of a small talon and watch the egg roll and wobble in place, secure in a cradle of cloth.

A tiny hand burst free, little talons curled as a piece of shell fell away. More cracks ran around the circumference. The egg rocked some more as hands fumbled around, pushing away bits and pieces of shell until finally, a head emerged, feathers slicked down and covered in goo. The bit's mouth opened, a scraggly cry emerging, and Orion could hold himself back no longer.

He scooped up his hatchling as Shockwave plucked the last bits of shell from their little one's body. Even covered in goo, Megatron could tell that the hatchling was a vivid blue all over, with small hints of lighter colors to break it up. A smol perhaps? Only time would tell.

Orion cooed at the hatchling, and Shockwave joined in with a low warble. Their bitlet responded in kind, hands grasping without coordination at Orion's fingers. Love bloomed in Orion's eyes, echoed in Shockwave's own. They huddled together, arms around each other, hands cupping their hatchling.

They were the perfect picture of a mated couple, of a happy family. There were all the joy Megatron could have ever wished for Orion and more.

"He's beautiful," Megatron said, and swore that the rushing in his ears was only growing louder and louder. There was a lump in his throat, and he prayed Orion and Shockwave chalked the sheen in his eyes up to happiness.

"Thank you," Orion murmured. He stroked a finger over the little one's crest. "We haven't a name yet. I'm waiting for the perfect one."

Megatron forced shallow breaths to hide the tremors in his breathing. "I'm sure you'll find it soon enough. Perhaps in one of your books."

Orion laughed, though it lacked his usual energy. He was exhausted. Carrying often did that to a smol, but it was worse for a bara. They weren't built for carrying. Especially another bara's hatchling. He'd laid the egg a week ago, but was slow to recover. Ratchet had reassured them this was normal, but Megatron couldn't help worrying.

"Congratulations," Megatron said again, because what else could he say? It was the furthest thing from a lie. "I am very happy for you and now, our flock has one more addition."

"Yes," Shockwave agreed. He curled his natural arm around Orion and looking down at their little one. "Another fledgling to join the ranks."

It would never be long enough.

Megatron backed up a step and thank Adaptus neither of them noticed. They were too enraptured, Orion cooing at his bitlet, Shockwave rumbling a song of comfort and love. Instinct was settling in.

"If you don't mind, I'll share the happy news with the flock," Megatron said, backing up again.

It hurt. It hurt because he was happy for them as much as it pained him, like a knife to the heart, a final blow to dreams he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He'd thought he'd moved on, but all he'd done was linger in agony, unconsciously wishing for something he didn't deserve.

"We'd be honored." Shockwave looked up, his unmarred eye bright with sheer joy. "We'd like the three days of privacy, however. And our flockmates might be more inclined to listen if the decree comes from our liege."

"But of course." Megatron smiled, his core shrinking into the tightest ball. "Your wish is my command. And that being said, I'll leave you to it."

The smallest of frowns flitted over Orion's lips. "Wait. You're his godsire. You don't want to hold him?"

Megatron shook his head and offered a smile, genuinely sincere if not a little sad. "Later," he murmured. "After you've fully bonded. I promise."

"Good. We want him to know you as well." Shockwave nuzzled Orion affectionately, still gently cupping his hatchling. "We want him to love you as much as we do."

"I'm sure he will." Had his voice cracked? Megatron sincerely hoped not. He dipped his head in a shallow bow. "Congratulations again."

He turned to go, swallowing over a lump in his throat, well aware that his plumage clung to his body, displaying his growing upset. He needed to leave before they noticed. He needed to--

"Megatron?"

Orion called for him. Megatron could not ignore him. He could never be capable of such a thing.

He turned in the doorway, one hand on the heavy tapestry, and faced them once again. "Yes?"

"Thank you," Orion said with that brilliant, welcoming smile that so easily brought Megatron to his knees all those years ago.

There was a wealth of responses Megatron could give in return, some of them acceptable, some of them not. Now was not the time for most of them. He knew there would never be a time.

So he simply smiled and nodded. "You're welcome."

Megatron escaped before Orion could call for him again. He let the heavy curtain swing shut, affording the mated couple their much-deserved privacy. They needed time to bond with their hatchling without a bunch of nosy harpies getting into their business.

Like this crowd that had gathered outside their door. No less than a half-dozen harpies were clustered in front of their nest, bara and smol alike. Most of them Megatron recognized as having immigrated from Crystal City, like Mirage and Tracks.

"How's the bitlet?"

"What does he look like?"

"What did they name him?"

Megatron held up a hand, calling for silence. "They wish for privacy as of this moment. They will make the announcement within a few days in accordance with the traditions of Crystal City." Which they should have all known.

Disappointed groans mixed with annoyed clicks but the crowd dispersed. Mirage lingered, trying to peek behind the curtain, but Megatron coughed and stared until the former spy ducked his head sheepishly. He murmured an apology and slunk away. Such a passion for hatchlings, that one. Orion and Shockwave better look out, lest Mirage try and adopt their little one to go with his horde.

Megatron breathed a sigh of relief. He knew he should probably join the celebration that an enthusiastic Rung had arranged in the atrium, but his core wasn't in it. He really wanted to be alone. He wanted to be somewhere he didn't have to pretend.

He went back to his nest.

It was dim, most of the lightning lanterns powered down. He bypassed everything and headed straight to the balcony. Unlike the others, he didn't have a railing. Why would he need one? His nest would never house fledglings. He wouldn't have to worry about the young ones falling to their deaths. He stepped out onto the ledge made of carefully woven branches, only to draw to a halt.

His balcony was already occupied.

Megatron swallowed a sigh at the bundle of bright red and orange feathers. He should have known, given Hot Rod's propensity to show up when and wherever he pleased. He thought they'd moved passed this. Given the number of times they argued, he'd thought enough was clear.

Megatron shook his head, dispensing with politeness. He didn't have the energy to deal with Hot Rod this evening. He didn't have the emotional strength to argue or chase away a desire he couldn't

pursue.

“Not tonight, Hot Rod.” He seated himself on the balcony edge, allowing his feet to dangle freely.

A little push and he could freefall until he caught himself. For a few, blissful seconds, he'd be free. It was tempting.

Hot Rod, however, remained standing next to him heedless of Megatron's irritation. “You're not at the party,” he observed. His tone was careful, all trace of the flirtatious cant he once carried gone. It was more than a little unnerving, actually.

Megatron never thought he'd miss the days when Hot Rod was a constant annoyance in his life.

“Neither are you.” Megatron looked at him, desire threading a hot path through his veins. Hot Rod truly was gorgeous and any other life, Megatron would have rutted him already, possibly mated him.

He would make someone a fine mate someday.

“There wasn't anyone there I cared about being with,” Hot Rod said with a shrug, his blue eyes focusing on Megatron with a sharpness he didn't often show. “And why aren't you there? Shouldn't our liege be in attendance?”

Megatron scowled. “I'm quite sure the celebrators don't need their liege looking over their plumage. I trust everyone to behave themselves.” And if not, he knew for a fact Soundwave was in attendance and sometimes, Soundwave's presence alone was enough of a deterrent.

No one did the chastising glare better than Soundwave. It came from raising those five hellions he called siblings. Even through the mask, he radiated disapproval.

“That's not why you didn't go,” Hot Rod said.

Megatron gave him an askance look. “Well, since you seem to know so much of what I'm thinking, why don't you tell me why I'm here and not there?”

Hot Rod sat down next to him, warm and close enough to touch, his scent wafting to Megatron's nose and making his instincts sit up and take notice. That he was already upset and longing for comfort did not help matters. Megatron clenched his hands into fists, his talons scraping at his palms, hoping the pain would serve as a distraction.

“Orion told me that you, him, and Soundwave originally came from the same flock,” Hot Rod said as he held Megatron's gaze. “He's known you all his life. He considers you a nest-sibling. And outside of Shockwave, you're the most important person in his life.”

It hurt. By Adaptus, did it hurt. It shouldn't, to know Orion loved him so, but it was a different flavor of love than the longing that had always turned Megatron's innards into a nauseating knot of despair and disappointment.

Megatron looked out into the dark night and the spread of the land before him. His nest was on the outer ring, so there was little to block his view. Even the branches and leaves had been trimmed back.

“Yes,” he answered, though Hot Rod hasn't asked a question. “Orion and I have known each other

for a long time. How that is relevant to the party, I don't--”

“How long have you loved him?”

Megatron startled, his head whipping toward Hot Rod. His breathing quickened, even more so when Hot Rod gave him a sympathetic look and reached out, laying his smaller hand over one of Megatron's. He was warm, so warm.

“I don't--”

“I don't know why you never told him.” Hot Rod leaned closer, his feathers fluffing, his ready-scent like an intoxicating pull on Megatron's desire. “Even after he mated Shockwave, you didn't move on. You're fighting against every instinct you have. Why?”

Megatron swallowed thickly. His instincts railed at him. His body tensed, feathers ruffling up. Heat pooled through him, into his core, and Adaptus, Hot Rod smelled so good. He was so close and so warm, his body language crying out for the claim Megatron's own body was so desperate to enact.

He should push Hot Rod away. He should leap from the balcony and go for a flight, clear his head. He should do everything except stare at Hot Rod in wordless wonder, stare as Hot Rod leaned closer, his exhalations wet and warm over Megatron's lips. He was close enough to taste, close enough to grab and nuzzle.

“He's not the only harpy out there,” Hot Rod murmured, his eyes so big and bright and enticing. “You don't have to force yourself to be alone.”

Megatron's breathing hitched. He tried to pull his hand out from under Hot Rod's, but it felt like there was a lazy heat in his entire body. It was hard enough to say no when Hot Rod was beyond touching distance. It was near impossible to do it now, when all he wanted was that closeness, to hold and be held, to touch and be touched.

He'd gone without for so long he craved it, inside and out, and Hot Rod was here, where he always seemed to be, and Megatron was so fragging tired of being alone.

“You don't understand,” Megatron began, but Hot Rod squeezed his hand and leaned in so close they shared the same breathing space.

“Try me,” Hot Rod murmured.

His lips slanted over Megatron's, so soft and sweet. He smelled of nectarines and honeysuckle, like he'd been hanging out in the flower gardens again.

A tremble ran through Megatron as every wall he'd built crumbled around him. It shattered against the onslaught of that gentle kiss and the parting of Hot Rod's mouth as his tongue swept over Megatron's lips, a warm and wet entreaty for entrance.

A low purr resonated in Megatron's chest. He leaned into Hot Rod, and found his free hand rising, cupping the smol's face before he knew what he was doing. Megatron's mouth opened, and he offered his tongue in return. Hot Rod moaned and pushed harder against Megatron, their tongues tangling together.

He should stop. Pull away. Put an end to this before he did something he would regret come the

morning.

But then Hot Rod cooed in his throat and climbed into Megatron's lap, the heat of him like a blanket against the chill encapsulating his core. Megatron shuddered with defeat. He gave in to the urge and held Hot Rod tighter. He closed his eyes and deepened the kiss, tasting the hint of sweet fruit on Hot Rod's tongue. Heat spread from his core and outward.

He'd forgotten the rut could feel like this. He'd forced himself to go without for so long, he'd forgotten the need of it, the way it swept through him and swallowed him whole.

Hot Rod trilled. He released his grip on Megatron's hand and threw his arms over Megatron's shoulders, undulating against Megatron. His plumage lifted and spread in a blatant display of invitation and need.

"Take me," he murmured against Megatron's lips, a small whine rising in his throat. *"Please."*

Megatron's purr shifted to a growl. He grabbed Hot Rod's hips and jerked the smol against him, the heat blazing into an inferno. His clava swelled within his sheath, threatening to emerge from his protective fluff.

He wanted Hot Rod. He'd always wanted Hot Rod. Now was no exception. This was wrong. This was so very wrong.

But they kissed again and it felt so right.

Hot Rod needed it as much as Megatron did. As he ground down, rubbing his rump against Megatron's thighs, the heat of his antrum radiated freely. Pearls of slickening fluid escaped, dripping onto Megatron's lap, smelling as sweet as Hot Rod himself.

Hot Rod was full of needy heat. His trills shifted to hunger and need, taking on the higher pitch of a fierce craving to be claimed. They rang in Megatron's ears, echoing all the way down to his groin. Hot Rod's talons carded through Megatron's plumage, scratching at his skin beneath, his body moving in stronger, needier rocks against Megatron's front.

"Claim me," he murmured, dripping more and more. "Take me. Have me. *Please.*"

Megatron, bara and liege, could not deny Hot Rod any more than he could deny his own instincts. He needed to rut, to mate, to claim.

He needed Hot Rod.

Megatron broke away from Hot Rod's mouth, nipping a trail down to the hollow of Hot Rod's throat, where iridescent crimson feathers glittered at him. He nosed his way through the soft down to the soft flesh beneath and grazed his teeth across Hot Rod's throat. The smol cried out, spine arching forward, his thighs trembling where they pressed against the outside of Megatron's.

"Megatron," Hot Rod gasped, his talons digging into the back of Megatron's shoulders, light pricks of pain that smacked of need.

Megatron shuddered, his teeth latching onto Hot Rod's throat, biting down enough Hot Rod could feel the pressure without breaking the skin. Hard enough Hot Rod would know who he was with, could recognize he was being claimed.

Hot Rod sucked in a harsh breath, a whistle through clenched teeth. His entire body jerked before he went still, and Megatron could feel the motion of his throat as he swallowed.

“B-bed?” he stuttered in request, his tailfeathers twitching with barely held restraint. The vibrations buzzed against Megatron’s mouth.

Megatron hummed approval and loosened his teeth, lifting his lips back to Hot Rod's. He kissed the smol deeply, his tongue sweeping into Hot Rod's mouth in a claiming kiss. Hot Rod keened and rubbed against him, dripping more pre-fluid down onto Megatron's lap.

“If I take you to my bed, you will not leave by morning,” Megatron growled against Hot Rod's mouth, forcing the bleary-gazed smol to look into his eyes. “Do you understand?”

Hot Rod's tongue swept across his lips. His talons raked against Megatron's shoulder. “Do I feel like I intend to object?” he breathed as he rolled his hips, the very tip of his unsheathed clava leaving a streak of precome against Megatron's abdominal feathers.

Megatron growled through his teeth and abruptly rolled them further away from the edge, all but slamming Hot Rod onto his back on the balcony. He caged Hot Rod beneath him and bright crimson and orange feathers splayed with excitement as Hot Rod's arms and wings pressed flat to the floor – complete submission.

Megatron's internals tightened. His sheath moistened, all of his arousal gathering southward. Hot Rod was no less affected. His groin was stained with his precome and the gorgeous head of his clava had peeped through his featherdown. Megatron shifted his weight to one arm and reached down with his free hand, rubbing the back of his knuckle against that damp head.

Hot Rod keened, head tossing back and thighs parting for Megatron, inviting him to explore the wet of his antrum.

Megatron dragged his knuckle lower, rolling it against Hot Rod's warm, throbbing nub. The smol warbled, his mouth opening in a desperate cry as he rocked against Megatron's knuckle. More slick dribbled free, turning the pale pink of his featherdown a rosier hue. Megatron's mouth watered, and he knew he could not take Hot Rod to nest without first tasting him.

He maneuvered his way between Hot Rod's thighs, sliding his hands to Hot Rod’s knees. He curled his talons around the smol's knees, keeping him wide, before Megatron pulled Hot Rod toward his mouth. The sweet fluid called to him, and Megatron licked a long, stripe over Hot Rod’s dewy center, ending with a flick to the tip of his clava.

The sound that rose from Hot Rod's throat was pure sin. He panted, hands landing on Megatron's shoulders, talons digging past feathers to hook into Megatron's skin.

“Oh, please, please, please,” he chanted, hips rolling up to meet Megatron's mouth.

Megatron chuckled and exhaled over the swelling folds, his lips closing around the throbbing nub. Hot Rod keened, bucking, and Megatron smiled against him.

Hot Rod was a delight to pleasure. It was a simple thing to press his mouth to Hot Rod, licking into the depths of him for the sweetness of his juices. He looked up, found Hot Rod’s face flushing pink, lips parted to release cries of need. Megatron’s insides tightened with want.

He purred as he licked deeper, feeling the walls flutter around his tongue, heard Hot Rod gasp and felt him tremble. Tickling the backs of Hot Rod's knees with his talons provoked a soft keen, and a buck of Hot Rod's hips. Hot Rod pulsed hot and hungry against his lips.

Oh, how he'd miss this simple pleasure.

Megatron mouthed his way to Hot Rod's nub, pulling it between his lips, applying a soft, suckling pressure. Hot Rod trembled, thighs tensing against Megatron's palms. His hips bucked and Megatron rose with them, tongue sliding firmly over Hot Rod's nub, scraping it ever so gently with his teeth.

Hot Rod's talons dug into Megatron. He tossed his head back, hips canting upward. And then he sang Megatron's name as he shattered against Megatron's lips, release sweeping through him in a wave of fluttering plumage.

Megatron looked up the length of his trembling body to see Hot Rod's teeth clamped on his bottom lip, hard enough to draw a thin bead of blood. Pleasure painted his face a beautiful shade.

He was perfect.

Megatron nuzzled Hot Rod's antrum, careful to avoid the sensitive nub, as the last flutters of release eased from Hot Rod's body. He drew back, licking slick from his lips.

Hot Rod's clava had finally decided to emerge, Megatron noticed. It was as lovely as Hot Rod himself, a slim, tapering length which darkened from gold at the tip to crimson at the base. A pattern of ridges along the center promised delight for whoever was lucky enough to receive it.

Megatron would like to enjoy it some day, if given the chance.

He stroked a hand over Hot Rod's hip and looked up at him. "You're beautiful," he murmured, well aware that Hot Rod's slick still dampened his face.

Hot Rod drew in a shaky breath. "Thank you," he said, voice a bit tremulous, his face wonderfully blushed. "For finally noticing, I mean."

"I've always noticed," Megatron corrected as he carefully shifted his weight, all the better to be in reach of the gorgeous clava so eagerly standing up for him.

Fluid beaded at the tip as if inviting him to sample, smelling as sweet as his antrum. Megatron lapped at it, curling his tongue to savor the flavor. A tart bite of honeysuckle. Was it Hot Rod's favorite?

"I wouldn't know it, given your behavior," Hot Rod replied, though the small whine at the base of his throat belied the retort.

"I was a fool," Megatron admitted, and took the tip of Hot Rod's clava into his mouth. Lips and tongue closed about it with a light suction.

Hot Rod shivered and gnawed on his bottom lip again. His hips worked in tiny thrusts, urging his clava deeper. Megatron swallowed, allowing the coned tip to nudge at the back of his throat. Hot Rod was the perfect size for oral, fitting into the shape of Megatron's mouth as though he'd always belonged there.

Hot Rod even knew to still himself in order not to harm, as Megatron worked his throat around Hot Rod's clava. He shook from the effort of it, however, and his talons moved to the floor, raking at the woven branches. He throbbed on Megatron's tongue as more fluid seeped from his antrum, sweet and sticky on his featherdown.

They would both need a soak in the springs after this. Perhaps Megatron would get lucky and they could take one together. Hot Rod would be stunning in the candlelight, the water shimmering on his feathers.

"Megatron," Hot Rod breathed and Megatron looked up at him, his bottom lip swollen and puffy from his gnawing. "Don't... But you..."

"Stop?" Megatron provided as he released Hot Rod's clava, the glossy length bobbing as though in an attempt to entice Megatron's mouth back to it.

Hot Rod warbled a negative. "No,. I mean, yes. I mean..." He rolled his hips, his thighs pressing in against Megatron's body. "What about you?"

Megatron kneaded the back of Hot Rod's knees before guiding Hot Rod's legs around his waist. His groin now nestled against Megatron's own, and Megatron rolled his hips, his clava rutting against the inviting damp.

"How considerate of you," Megatron teased.

He leaned over Hot Rod, nuzzling his cheek against the smaller harpy's. His lips found Hot Rod's ear, and he tasted it with a hot exhale. Hot Rod trembled, clutching at him, hips rising up to meet Megatron's slow, careful grinding.

Megatron's plumage raised. Need clawed inside of him, demanding he finally take Hot Rod. He should have done this ages ago, he knew. He should have claimed Hot Rod when the beautiful smol first approached him.

He wanted to give in at last. He wanted to pin Hot Rod down, clamp onto his throat, slide into Hot Rod, and finally claim what should have always been his. He wanted for Hot Rod to writhe and warble beneath him, eager and pliant, embracing. He wanted to pleasure the pretty smol until he was limp with release and bathed in sweat, his face aglow with satisfaction.

Megatron growled and clamped on the tip of Hot Rod's ear with his teeth, a careful pressure that was far from the piercing bite he wanted to lay. Hot Rod keened and arched up against him. He scrambled at Megatron's shoulders, dislodging several feathers and leaving furrows in Megatron's skin. His hips rocked furiously, antrum spilling slick over Megatron's groin.

He wanted it as much as Megatron did.

It was satisfyingly easy to scoop Hot Rod into his arms, so tiny was the smol in comparison. Hot Rod squawked in surprise, flailing before he sank his claws into Megatron's back. Their bodies pressed together, Megatron's clava grinding against Hot Rod's belly and making him shiver.

"To the bed now?" Hot Rod asked, his tone hopeful as he nuzzled Megatron's cheek.

"Unless there's somewhere else you'd rather go," Megatron replied before he stole Hot Rod's mouth, tasting the blood on his lips.

Hot Rod moaned, mouth opening to Megatron, letting him claim with lips and tongue. Megatron blindly stumbled inside, toward the pillow-lined hollow of his nest, unwilling to take his lips from Hot Rod's.

He didn't stumble into the nest, but it was a near thing. He managed to be gentle as he lay Hot Rod amid the blankets, a place no one else had ever been. That thought filled him with an unexpected heat as he was struck by the notion it was because Hot Rod was the only one who belonged there.

Megatron's chest rumbled. He kissed Hot Rod again, more fervently, over and over. A lightning-hot inferno blazed within him, and all Megatron could think was claiming Hot Rod. He wanted to fill Hot Rod until the lovely smol cried out in pleasure, until he could think of nothing but Megatron and ecstasy.

The urge to bite Hot Rod's throat and claim him rose up even stronger. Megatron had to swallow it down, focus on Hot Rod instead. He was lucky. He needed to remember that. Hot Rod was worth so much more. He deserved to be cherished, not taken and discarded by a beast.

Hot Rod keened in his throat, as if agreeing with Megatron's internal debate.

Megatron broke away from the kiss, his breathing ragged. He gripped Hot Rod's hips, rolling his own slowly, grinding his clava against Hot Rod's dewy heat. He looked into blue eyes, bright with need.

"Tell me," Megatron said, not entirely sure what he wanted to hear, only that he needed Hot Rod to say it.

Hot Rod's intake bobbed. His hands slid to Megatron's head, his thumbs pricking at Megatron's cheeks. Their faces were so close, Megatron could feel the heat of Hot Rod's exhalations.

"Take me," Hot Rod murmured with a shuddering breath. "In every way you know, my liege. Make me yours."

Heat flashed through Megatron like a wildfire. He shuddered, eyelids drooping, a ripple running through his feathers.

Yes, that was what he'd needed to hear.

"Please," Hot Rod groaned and dragged Megatron's mouth to his, sealing their lips together in a fierce kiss.

Megatron growled, hands tightening on Hot Rod's hips. He pinned the smol down, fitting himself to the best angle, and obeyed. He filled Hot Rod in a single push, the smol's head snapping back in a soundless cry. Blazing heat engulfed Megatron, Hot Rod clenching down around him as though trying to lock him inside.

He was so very tight. Almost as though he'd never shared himself. Almost as though this was his first claiming. But that was impossible. That was....

Hot Rod went rigid. His claws sank into Megatron's shoulders, and he felt the trickle of blood. Hot Rod's sharp inhale was far too audible, but Megatron pressed his mouth to Hot Rod's throat, soaking in his sweet scent.

Megatron rumbled. His teeth grazed over Hot Rod's throat, feeling the vibrations of Hot Rod's moans. He started to move, slow and deep, instincts surging forward to demand control of the pace. He resisted, but the heat was suffocating, and it had been so long since he'd had another, so long since he felt the warmth of a body beneath him.

He moved faster, hips snapping. He panted, heavy and raw. All he could hear was his own harsh breathing, the rustling of feathers, the frantic pulse of his core, beating in his ears. Pleasure wound within him, tighter and tighter, a tension desperate to snap. He snarled, feeling as though he'd tapped into some bestial side of himself, and latched onto Hot Rod's throat. He tasted the beat of Hot Rod's core with his tongue and lips.

A sound filtered through. A thin whining sound. It wasn't... it wasn't right.

Megatron blinked. He loosened his teeth and paid attention. Hot Rod was making that noise. Hot Rod was no longer as pliant and giving beneath him. If Megatron had to put name to it, he would call it...

He would call it a name that made an instant flush of ice water dump over his head.

Megatron paused, his clava easing from Hot Rod's antrum and giving a throb of protest. He forced his claws out of Hot Rod's hips, and his teeth from Hot Rod's throat. He pulled back, concern trickling in.

Hot Rod was flushed a light pink and sweat gathered at his forehead. His face was a mask of emotion, as though he was in pain and trying to conceal it, his bottom lip swollen and dotted with blood.

Frag.

His first suspicions were right on the wing.

Megatron cursed himself out from top to bottom and immediately gentled his hold. He shifted his weight so he could cup Hot Rod's face and sweep a knuckle over his cheek.

"You're in pain," he said.

"No, I'm not," Hot Rod retorted with a lopsided grin. He twitched his hips as though trying to entice Megatron to continue, but he couldn't hide his wince. "I don't know what you--"

"Is this your first claiming?" Megatron asked, cutting off what were obvious lies. As much as he enjoyed the feel of Hot Rod, the uneasy fluttering of his antrum was further proof.

Hot Rod's flush deepened. He sucked his bottom lip into his mouth and looked away.

Megatron leaned closer, pressing their noses together. He put a little growl into his vocals, though he was more upset with himself than Hot Rod.

"Answer the question, Hot Rod."

Hot Rod warbled a rolling keen. His crest feathers slicked down, his thighs clamping harder on Megatron's hips.

“Yes,” he admitted, barely above a whisper.

Guilt slammed into Megatron, and on its heels came surprise, despite his suspicions. He reared back, staring down at the gorgeous smol who could have had his pick of any harpy in Megatron's flock and no doubt in whichever flock he'd come from.

“Why?” Megatron asked, bewildered.

Hot Rod rolled his eyes and kneaded at Megatron's back, the scrape of his claws causing a quick bite of pain. “I thought that was obvious,” he said. “I wanted the best. I wouldn't settle for less.”

Megatron stared. The best? And Hot Rod thought that best was Megatron? But then, he didn't know the truth, did he? Didn't know Megatron was damaged, useless as a mate. He couldn't give Hot Rod anything a proper mate should.

“I don't--”

Hot Rod shook his head and canted his hips, catching the tip of Megatron's clava with his damp. “I chose you. I'm glad I did. It doesn't have to mean anything more than that. You don't even have to claim me. Just don't stop.”

There was a rock in Megatron's throat. “You should have said something.”

“Why? So I could guilt you into agreeing? Frag that!” Hot Rod snorted and flexed his fingers on Megatron's shoulder. “Rut with me! I've waited too damn long for this. Don't you dare stop!” The last made his voice crackle, and something flashed hot and fierce in his eyes.

Megatron swallowed thickly.

“Very well,” he said and stroked the back of his knuckles over Hot Rod's cheek. He curled over Hot Rod, pressing his forehead to Hot Rod's, calming the urgency in his groin, because he would not cause Hot Rod further pain.

“Don't turn me aside now,” Hot Rod murmured. He tightened his thighs around Megatron's waist, scraping the back of his legs with his tarsal talons.

“I won't,” Megatron promised.

He dipped his head and captured Hot Rod's lips again, though this time he made the kiss gentle and sweet. Savoring. Hot Rod moaned into the mouth, clutching at him, making a needy noise in the back of his throat. His body rose up to meet Megatron's, still desperate and eager, despite Megatron's foible.

Megatron was determined to make up for it.

He licked over Hot Rod's lips and let his mouth wander, dotting little kisses and nips along the curve of Hot Rod's jaw and down into the vulnerable warmth of his throat. Hot Rod squirmed, thighs pressing inward, hips rocking up in wordless request.

“Please.” Hot Rod keened.

“Shh. All in due time.”

Megatron drew back, gently dragging the palms of his hands down until he held Hot Rod’s hips. He sat back on his heels as his thumbs swept inward, caressing the delicate area surrounding Hot Rod’s heat-swollen antrum and clava.

He was so rigid, the tip pearly with pre-fluid, despite Megatron’s mistake. Slick seeped from his antrum, and his little nub was plump and juicy, eager for Megatron’s lips. He growled quietly and lifted Hot Rod to his mouth, lips gently nuzzling the swollen folds.

Hot Rod made a choked noise, his hands scraping at the pillows and blankets. His head tilted back, baring his throat and the marks Megatron had made. Seeing them filled him with a possessive lust, and he seized Hot Rod’s nub with his lips, licking and suckling at it while Hot Rod writhed in his grip.

Hot Rod’s lips parted in a breathy moan. His eyes became slits of blue fire. “Mate with me,” he panted. “Stop stalling!”

“I am not stalling.” Megatron caressed Hot Rod with the tip of his tongue, drawing another purr and more dribbles of sweet slick. “I am apologizing.” He gently licked, easing his tongue inside Hot Rod, trying to lap away the sting of his abrupt penetration.

Hot Rod’s back arched as he loosed a low keen. A pillow surrendered to the sharpness of his talons, some of Megatron’s molt spilling free of the case.

“A-apology accepted,” he moaned.

Megatron purred against Hot Rod and licked him ever so gently, his own hunger rising as the sweet slick slid into his mouth. He imagined pinning Hot Rod beneath him, licking him to ecstasy over and over again, until Hot Rod was a limp and wrecked puddle of feathers. He could stay here all night, hearing those sweet cries and watching Hot Rod come undone. It would be no hardship at all.

He mouthed the firm little nub, tongue flicking over it, until Hot Rod’s hips rocked to match his rhythm. The sweet taste of him lingered, and Megatron moaned against Hot Rod, licking deeper. He tilted Hot Rod’s hips further, sipping up the steady stream of slick, ignoring the hot pulse of desire tugging at his groin.

“Oh, please.” Hot Rod pawed blindly at Megatron. “You’re forgiven. I need more, Megatron. Please.”

Megatron licked into him again and pressed the gentlest of kisses to Hot Rod’s nub. “Are you sure?” He rubbed his cheek on the inside of Hot Rod’s thigh, looking up the length of the smol’s body.

“Don’t make me beg.” He grasped Megatron’s arms just above his wrists and tugged. “Want you inside me. Please.” His voice was desperate, his hips full of restless energy as they rolled up toward Megatron.

“Then I will do as you wish,” Megatron murmured with a lingering kiss to Hot Rod’s dripping center.

Megatron mouthed his way up Hot Rod’s body, stopping to leave little kisses on his clava, over his belly, at the hollow of Hot Rod’s throat, until he claimed Hot Rod’s mouth again. A moan of relief

escaped Hot Rod's throat, his exhalations scorching and hungry as he gripped at Megatron's upper arms.

Megatron blanketed Hot Rod with his weight, his wings. He nudged his way back between Hot Rod's thighs, the swollen head of his clava brushing Hot Rod's nub and the wet damp of him. Hot Rod made another needy noise, canting his hips upward, begging Megatron take him.

Megatron obliged, easing into Hot Rod as though he had never tasted him. A moan rumbling through his chest as his clava was engulfed in wet heat and Megatron deepened their kiss, his tongue stroking along the inside of Hot Rod's mouth.

This time, however, he did not lose himself. He focused on Hot Rod's pleasure, on making the smol cry out with joy, rather than stifle his pain. He rocked his hips, his featherdown rubbing Hot Rod's nub as the tip of his clava teased that special spot deep within Hot Rod. The smol opened to him, soft and yielding, a keen warbling in his throat.

Hot Rod gave himself to Megatron fully, and Megatron returned that trust with all he could offer. He nibbled his way back to Hot Rod's throat, soothing his bites with quick licks as Hot Rod wrapped his arms around Megatron's shoulders. His wings blanketed Megatron's back like a warm shawl, and he rose up to meet each of Megatron's thrusts.

They moved in perfect concert, as if they had been together all along and knew of one another's rhythm. Hot Rod smelled so sweet, and the noises he made forced heat through Megatron's veins. He dragged his teeth along Hot Rod's throat and ran his tongue over the impressions left by his earlier bites, feeling Hot Rod swallow against his lips.

Heat rushed over and through Megatron, and release came upon him like a slow tidal wave. Pleasure overtook him as he spilled within Hot Rod, clutching him like Hot Rod was the only thing to keep him afloat. It had been so long since he'd found release by any hand but his own that he felt weak, bobbing helplessly along.

He shivered, body throbbing with aftershocks, and nibbled a path along the featherdown of Hot Rod's belly, his lips finding the eager pulse of Hot Rod's clava. He took it into his mouth, laving his tongue across the tip, and drew in the scent of his own spill and Hot Rod's natural sweetness. Hot Rod's warble of encouragement was like music.

Megatron suckled Hot Rod through another release, savoring the taste of Hot Rod's spill, sharper than his slick, but no less appealing. Hot Rod went rigid in his arms, body arrested by pleasure, before he slumped into the nest. His hips moved, rising and falling in slow motion, as though seeking more.

He was lovely. Why had Megatron held himself back from this?

Megatron worked his way back to Hot Rod's mouth for another deep, lingering kiss. Hot Rod moaned into it, his talons gently scraping at Megatron's feathers. He shivered with want, smelling deliciously open and ready. He was already urging with his knees, his thighs, trying to get Megatron between them again, wordlessly requesting more.

Megatron couldn't have this forever, but for tonight, yes? He could indulge for tonight. He could ensure that when Hot Rod left him, it would be with memories of warmth and pleasure, good memories he would never want to forget.

He kissed Hot Rod again, over and over, each more lingering than the last. He stroked his fingers over Hot Rod's dampness, knuckles teasing along a plump nub. He asked without words if he could have the smol again, and Hot Rod answered with eager keens, his body rolling up to meet Megatron's touches.

It would not last beyond morning. Megatron couldn't allow himself to hope for anything more.

But tonight?

Tonight was his to savor.

Chapter 11

A soft cough roused Megatron from one of the best night's sleep he'd had in years, one so deep he didn't want to wake. He was warm and comfortable and snuggled up next to an equally warm and soft body. Why would he want to wake?

But the very same anomaly that made him want to linger, was the same that caused him to waken further. Megatron did not share his berth. Rarely, he allowed those dear to him to sleep in the same vicinity. He and Orion had once upon a time, when they were first establishing the flock, and Soundwave, too. Soundwave's brothers sometimes joined him in his nest when they felt the need as well.

This was no platonic berthmate, however. Whomever had joined his nest was as entangled with Megatron as any lover, which was odd because Megatron knew he did not have a lover. He had vowed not to take one.

Why was he not alone?

Megatron forced himself awake, peeling his eyes open. He saw nothing but a poof of bright crimson and gold feathers and memory returned all in a rush.

Orion and Shockwave and their hatchling.

Hot Rod coming to him. Hot Rod kissing him. Megatron giving in to what had always been a shared desire and taking Hot Rod to berth, to rutting with him, to being Hot Rod's first claim. They had spent the rest of the night rutting as though a fire had been lit under their rumps or the fate of the flock depended upon it.

Even now, Megatron could feel the stickiness clumping his featherdown.

Hot Rod was yet asleep. He looked innocent. His eyes were closed, his bright red lashes sweeping his cheeks. He snuggled against Megatron's right shoulder, his left hand hooked into Megatron's plumage and his wing serving as a blanket for them. Their legs were tangled.

Hot Rod had not been the one to wake him.

There was another polite, if muted, cough.

Megatron looked up.

Soundwave stood over the edge of the berthnest, one hand lifted to cover Laserbeak's eyes while his mouth guard drooped, betraying the slight curve to his lips.

"As much as I hate to disturb my liege, I fear I must," Soundwave said. His voice was as deeply apologetic as it was raspy. "There is a phalanx of soldiers here from Iacon, and they are demanding the return of their prince."

Megatron blinked. "We have no prince." At least, none that he knew of. Orion, after all, was from Crystal City.

Soundwave's head tilted down, and his gaze shifted from Megatron to Hot Rod and back again. "Not according to them. They've come for Hot Rod."

"What?" Megatron hissed, his entire body tensing.

Hot Rod shifted, making a low humming noise in his throat. He frowned in his sleep, though he was swimming toward consciousness. It was too cute.

No. Megatron needed to concentrate. He shifted, stirring Hot Rod even further, though he lifted his other hand to further blanket the smol and shield him from Laserbeak's innocent eyes. Soundwave dipped his head in thanks and dropped his hand.

"Who are they?" Megatron demanded as alertness started to set in.

He could see the light of dawn filtering in from the balcony. No wonder it was so difficult to focus. He'd barely slept at all.

"Captain Springer and his unit."

Megatron's frown deepened. He'd heard of Iacon's Elite Guard and their captain. Springer was in a warrior class all his own. And if Megatron truly had Iacon's prince, he was obligated to at least locate said prince, or risk war. What a perilous situation. Megatron was not one to return any of his flock to a place they'd escaped from. But a prince?

The political ramifications were terrifying

Iacon, and its leader Ultra Magnus, was more than a little protective of the royal family. The line of Ultra was much beloved. Though why their prince had gone missing in the first place, Megatron did not know.

"And they think their missing prince is Hot Rod?" Megatron asked as he stroked the back of his knuckles over Hot Rod's face and rumbled in his chest, trying to wake the sleeping smol.

Soundwave dipped his head. "Perhaps you should ask your mate, my liege."

"He's not my mate."

Soundwave chose not to respond to that, but his expression said it all. Megatron rolled his eyes and ignored his Speaker for the time being, turning his attention to Hot Rod. The smol made a little murmuring noise in his throat and burrowed his face into Megatron's plumage. While adorable, now was not the time to indulge.

"Hot Rod," Megatron rumbled into the smol's ear. "Wake up. You have some explaining to do."

Hot Rod stretched against him like a feline, his eyes easing open. "Second thoughts already?" he murmured, perhaps meant as a joke, but there was a deeper concern in his voice. One Megatron could not address right now. There were larger issues.

"That is a discussion we will save for later," Megatron replied in a firm tone, the one he used as liege. "Right now, there is a phalanx of elite guard from Iacon in my aerie and my Speaker tells me you know why."

Hot Rod's eyes widened, his mouth dropping open. He pulled back from Megatron's arms. "Who... who is it?"

"Captain Springer."

A shiver passed through Hot Rod's body. He drew away completely, moving to the opposite side of the nestberth. His feathers slicked close to his body, his expression closing off to Megatron.

"Are you going to tell me why the elite guard is here?" Megatron demanded. He pulled himself to his full height.

Hot Rod stood as well, though his head was bowed. His hands formed loose fists at his side, his feathercrest drooping.

"They're here for me. I didn't think they'd find me, but I guess I underestimated Springer." Hot Rod curled his lips in a wry grin before he straightened, as though putting on a cape of confidence. "I'm also surprised Soundwave didn't find the truth sooner. I must be better at subterfuge than I thought."

Soundwave made a noise of displeasure. "I knew," he said as Laserbeak chirped on his shoulder. "It was not relevant."

Megatron whirled toward his Speaker. "Not relevant?"

"Kaon accepts all so long as no danger is present," Soundwave rasped. "Minor Rodimus is not a threat, therefore it was not relevant. Per protocol."

Protocol that Megatron had put into place when they first decided to leave Crystal City and set out on their own. A newcomer's past did not matter and was his own to keep, so long as it did not present a threat. Soundwave was allowed to keep what secrets he deemed irrelevant and Megatron trusted his judgment.

Wait.

Minor Rodimus?

Megatron turned back toward Hot Rod, who was tangling his talons together. "Minor Rodimus?" he repeated. "You really are a prince?"

"Is that so shocking? Orion is too, you know." Hot Rod rubbed his shoulder with the heel of his hand, his gaze focused on the floor. "If he can abandon Optimus, why can't I abandon Rodimus? Kaon is about second chances, isn't it?"

"Yes, but..." Megatron sighed and pressed his palm to his face. This was a political nightmare and a massive headache. "I do not have the resources to fend off Iacon, Hot Rod. This could cause a war."

Hot Rod's feathers rustled. "My sire would not have attacked without just cause. He's smarter than that." He turned his back on Megatron, head swinging from side to side, before he snatched up a damp cloth from Megatron's sink bath.

"But he would send a contingent of elite guard apparently."

Ravage loped into Megatron's nest, his quadrupedal stride silent. If he hadn't spoken up, Megatron

would have not heard him enter. Surely, he'd picked up that stealthy quality from his brother.

"And they are getting restless," Ravage said as he moved nearer to Soundwave, sitting back on his haunches. His dark eyes assessed the room, narrowing when they found Hot Rod, who was furiously scrubbing down his feathers, erasing all trace of their encounter last night from his groin and belly.

"He sent them to find me, not attack." Hot Rod sighed and nibbled on his bottom lip before giving Megatron a look from beneath his lashes. "I'm sorry. I'll take care of it." He scrubbed harder and faster, a few loose feathers fluttering to the floor.

"I am Liege. I will handle it." Megatron started forward, a low growl building in his chest. As angry as he was at Hot Rod, there were other things to consider here. "They will learn to respect me and my flock. I did not leave Crystal City only to be cowed in my own aerie."

"No." There was a flutter of bright orange and red feathers as Hot Rod moved to intercept him, hands lifted as if they were enough to keep Megatron back. The wet cloth flopped pointedly from his talons.

Megatron reared back. "No?" he repeated, irritation throbbing harder in the pit of his belly. His hands curled, talons scraping his palms. "I am Liege." And Hot Rod would not tell him what he could and could not do in his aerie.

Hot Rod – Minor Rodimus – was only a prince in Iacon. Not here.

"And I am trying to save your flock," Hot Rod snapped as he tossed the damp rag in the vague direction of the bowl. He firmly planted himself between the Kaon harpies and the door. "This is my fault, and I'll take care of it. No matter what that means."

He turned in a swirl of feathers and swept out of Megatron's nest with all the command he must have been taught in his youth. He'd been raised in wealth and privilege, and how could Megatron not have seen that? Had he willfully blinded himself to what was so obvious? Starscream had even suggested Hot Rod was royalty once, and Megatron thought the idea absurd.

How narrow-sighted he'd been.

"I am tempted to say congratulations, if not for the ill timing of the Elite Guard's arrival," Ravage drawled with a tilt of his head. His inky-black tailfeathers swished behind him. "Dare I ask what changed your mind?"

Megatron shot him a look, but Soundwave beat him to it, hissing a warning at his sibling. Ravage ignored both, sitting back on his knees. If it was possible to look both placid and smug, Ravage managed to portray both.

Soundwave sighed. "He will leave," he said. "Does my liege wish that?"

"I'm not going to make him stay if he doesn't want to." Megatron moved to the washbasin and gave himself a quick wipedown, aware he no doubt had dried fluids coating his groin and face. He didn't look very much like a strong and capable liege, now did he?

He couldn't face the Elite Guard like this. He needed to prove he was capable of taking care of both himself and his flock. He needed to show they couldn't throw their weight around as they pleased.

He was still leader of this aerie.

“But you mated him, yes?” Ravage tilted his head. He sounded confused, because of course he would be. Anyone would in this situation.

Hot Rod surely stank of Megatron. They had rutted through the night. He had more claiming bites than any smol Megatron had ever taken to berth. Even now, Megatron’s instincts clamored at him, screaming that he return Hot Rod to his nestberth and continue the claiming until Hot Rod was his mate. Megatron had never felt so strongly about someone. Even with Orion, the feelings had been in his core.

What he felt for Hot Rod, these needs rising up within him, they were something more than that. Something defying words.

“I did not,” Megatron admitted. He breathed shallowly, the air either too thick or too thin, he wasn’t sure anymore. “I will not. I can not. And you know why, Soundwave.”

His Speaker closed the distance between them and rested his hands on Megatron’s shoulders. They were of a height, though Soundwave was much slimmer in comparison. A tilt of his head and Megatron could see Soundwave’s eyes through the protective visor.

“Hatchlings are not the only thing which a happy mate needs. You assume you hold no worth, my liege, but understand, that is far from the truth.”

Megatron’s shoulders slumped. “Hot Rod admitted he came here for the best. He mistakenly believes that to be me.”

“In that case, do not bother to go out there,” Ravage said, though almost offhand as he examined his right hand and nipped at the sharpest of his talons. “He will leave, return to his flock, and you won’t be faced with the burden of him any longer.”

It would be easier, wouldn’t it?

Megatron looked away from Soundwave, toward his nestberth and the balcony beyond, where everything had changed for him the night before. It was too easy to tap into the memories, to remember how responsive Hot Rod had been. How he’d moaned Megatron’s name as he slid into the smol’s velvety heat. Or how Hot Rod had pinned him down, hips moving in a frantic rut. And more, how sweet Hot Rod had been on his tongue, sweet and eager and pliant.

Would it be easier to let him go than face potential rejection? The very same he’d protected himself against for so long?

Was he that much of a coward?

“You will do him a great disservice if you don’t let him make his own choice,” Soundwave rasped and dropped his hands from Megatron’s shoulders.

Ravage rose, arching his back like a feline, his tailfeathers rising behind him in a display not unlike a peacock’s. “It would also set a dangerous precedent if Ultra continues to think he can storm into Kaon and demand whatever he wants.”

Megatron breathed in and out.

“You deserve to be loved,” Soundwave managed before his voice cut out on him. He grimaced and rubbed at his throat with his knuckles.

Guilt swamped Megatron. He had not protected Soundwave then. And now, Soundwave risked pain to encourage Megatron to seek out happiness. Sometimes, Megatron feared he did not deserve his Speaker's loyalty.

Megatron straightened and squared his shoulders. “Whether I mate Hot Rod or not, he is flock. He is mine. And I will not bow to Magnus, or any other Ultra, thinking they can demand a harpy from my aerie. No matter who they were.”

Ravage stood full bipedal for once – not keen on weirding out the visitors apparently. “We are with you, my liege. You have many a warrior who will fight beside you.”

“Let us hope it does not come to that.” Megatron's core hammered in his throat.

He moved past both of them, trying to pull confidence over and around him. He was not the largest or fiercest of his flock, but he hoped that the rules of respect would be all he needed. If not, Megatron was not without adequate training. He could and would defend himself, violently if he must.

He hoped Hot Rod wished to stay. If anything, they needed to talk about last night. They needed to decide where to go from here. Soundwave was right.

Megatron needed to tell Hot Rod the truth and let him make the choice for himself.

Megatron emerged from his nest to a rising clamor, echoing from below. He followed it through the halls to the atrium, recalling the same level of chaos had accompanied Starscream's arrival. He discovered the atrium packed with his flock. There were more than he expected, given the time of day.

Someone in the Elite Guard unit was carrying a staff and the banner of Iacon hung from it, blue and white, as Grimlock had described. So. The identity of the roaming band of soldiers was clear now. It was a relief to know there weren't two groups of harpies wandering around with the intention to cause trouble.

Perhaps the guard meant to stake a claim, with that ridiculously oversized banner. Hah. Over Megatron's dead body. He had not left the strictures of Crystal City to find himself claimed by another flock.

His flock was making quite the chatter, but even above that, Megatron heard another voice, this one unfamiliar. The deep, resonating bass had to belong to Captain Springer. By Iacon law, he was no doubt the only one allowed to speak to the prince. They isolated their royals, Megatron had heard.

No wonder Hot Rod left.

“Come home, Rodimus,” the large bara was saying, or cajoling rather. Megatron could make out the large, dark green crest in the midst of the crowd. “You don't belong here.”

“None of us belong here,” Megatron said to announce himself. He stepped into view, quickly assessing the gathered harpies.

One could tell at a glance that they didn't belong here as well. They wore thick and heavy armor, though only Springer's was made of chainmail, while the others bore polished wood. They carried stronger weapons as well, while Megatron's warriors relied on lighter armament. The soldiers clustered around Springer wore masks made of flattened metals, and Springer had a helmet tucked under one elbow, a false crest jutting from the top which mimicked his own vibrant emerald feathers.

Megatron continued, firmly planting himself between his flock and the Iaconian guard. "Kaon had never played home to harpies until I came here, and it is only our treaty with the humans which allows us our continued residence here. So by that argument, we should all leave."

Megatron's flock closed ranks behind him, though Soundwave stayed at his right flank, Ravage at his side and Laserbeak perched on his shoulder. If Orion and Shockwave had not been cloistered, Megatron knew they would be present as well. He'd passed more familiar faces – Drift and Perceptor, Maximus and Rung, Roadbuster, Bulkhead...

Megatron was not alone.

Hot Rod stood between Megatron and Springer, his back to Megatron. His shoulders slumped, his usually vibrant feathers dull and drooping. His plumage, too, sagged as though carrying the weight of defeat.

He half-turned to acknowledge Megatron, and Megatron's core ached at his expression, which reflected none of the joy Hot Rod was known for.

"Captain Springer is right," Hot Rod – no, Rodimus. He was Rodimus – said with a wan smile that did not reach his eyes. "I do not belong here. I am an unmated smol who will never be satisfied and my sire calls for me."

Megatron stared hard at Springer, a bara who matched Megatron in size and height. Like the others, he was armed with a long spear, though it was probably collapsible for the sake of flight.

He had the bearing that probably would have intimidated lesser bara.

But Megatron had clawed his way free of the chains of Crystal City, dragging Orion and Soundwave along with him. He'd fought his way to the safety of Kaon, defending his friends from human slavers and angry harpies who'd thought Megatron was intruding. A dressed up bara from Iacon did not give him pause. The only person who had the power to hurt him in this atrium at this very moment was Hot R-- Rodimus.

Megatron looked at Springer and dismissed him. He turned his gaze to Hot Rod alone, daring to take one step closer to the pretty smol.

"You belong wherever you want to belong," Megatron said. "If you want to stay in Kaon, then that is your right, unmated or not. Kaon has always been a haven, and I will fight to keep it that way."

Hot Rod chewed on his bottom lip. He glanced at Springer before he turned fully toward Megatron, his shoulders straight and back. He lifted his head, blue eyes firm and unyielding. There it was, evidence of a harpy raised in royalty.

"I came here in search of something. I thought I had found it," Hot Rod said. He paused, and

brushed the back of his knuckles over his throat.

Megatron could plainly see the imprint of his own teeth, where he'd so thoroughly marked Hot Rod that it was almost a claim. The sight of Hot Rod touching it sent a jolt through Megatron's insides. His back feathers ruffled, a low growl rising in his chest. Instinct clawed to the surface, and Megatron had to stop himself from crossing the floor and yanking the smol into his arms.

Hot Rod – no, Rodimus, frag but Megatron needed to remember that – dropped his hand. “But I was mistaken,” he finished.

Captain Springer took a step forward, a step closer to Hot Rod. “Whatever this harpy says, Rodimus, the truth is that your sire wants you home. He and your carrier have worried themselves into fits. I'm sorry you didn't find what you were looking for, but that only means you don't belong here.” His brows drew down, his voice approaching a growl. “Not with their kind.”

Rodimus visibly swallowed, his eyes holding Megatron's as he nodded. “I understand,” he said, and stepped back, closer to Springer than anyone else. “It's time I went home anyway.” He turned as if to go, head held high, but the droop of his feathers, the flattening of his crest, all spoke of regret.

No.

Megatron couldn't allow this. Not without trying. Not without...

He took a step forward. “Wait.”

Hot Rod paused. He half-turned, and Megatron saw only a single blue eye.

Now was the moment. He only wished they had a bit more privacy. He was aware that more than half his flock was here, watching this show. Their observation did not feel judgmental, but Megatron was intensely private. He felt the weight of their scrutiny.

“Stay,” Megatron murmured, careful to make it sound like a request and not a command.

He had no authority to bid anything of Rodimus Minor, the heir to Ultra Magnus. He was only a former soldier in the royal guard of Crystal City, now liege of the smallest flock in all of Cybertron, a home of outcasts and outliers and the abandoned or forgotten.

In comparison to a prince of the great Iacon flock, who was he?

Hot Rod's turned further, his eyes widening by fractions. “To what end?” he asked, his voice audibly shaking. His feathers drew even tighter to his body, making him appear smaller.

Megatron swallowed over a lump in the throat. He pretended he stood here alone, that the crowd had gone and it was only he and Hot Rod. He looked into bright blue eyes, and he knew what he wanted, if only he dared take the chance.

“To a bond,” Megatron answered, and his core throbbed so hard and fast, he swore he felt the beat in his ears. “With me.”

Hot Rod's eyes rounded. Despite his attempt to ignore them, Megatron heard the murmurs and the surprised gasps. He wasn't sure what it was that surprised them the most: him finally agreeing to court someone or it being Hot Rod he chose.

Especially since Megatron had so firmly put the choice in Hot Rod's hands. Right here and now, Hot Rod could break him. He could refuse, and he had every right to do so. He could turn his back on Megatron, walk away, and no one would fault him for it.

Hot Rod took a step toward him, a warble rising in his throat. "Did you--"

"Absolutely not," Springer snarled, his face taking on a stormy cast. His emerald green plumage ruffled. "The minor of Iacon is not going to mate some Crystal City reject."

Megatron's eyes narrowed, his plumage lifting before he could convince himself to calm down. "You will not insult me in my own aerie." He flexed his fingers so that his talons further extended.

The ranks of his flock closed at his back, his warriors moving to form a solid barrier behind him and between the potential fight and his flock. They might not have been draped in armor like the Elite Guard, but Megatron knew his soldiers could put up a good fight. Drift was from a warrior sect out in Tesseract. Maximus had been head of the guard back in Polyhex. Roadbuster served with Drift in Tesseract.

"I would have you hold your tongue." Megatron took a step forward, refusing to give any ground to strangers who would invite themselves into Megatron's aerie and cause a ruckus. "Lest I remove it for you."

Springer growled, and his crest snapped upright. "You impudent little--"

"Stop!" Hot Rod shoved between them, arms stretched wide, his back to Megatron as he faced Springer. "Stand down, Captain. You offered insult. You are in the wrong. The Tyrest Accord is clear on this."

Before now, Megatron would have been surprised Hot Rod even knew of the Tyrest Accord. He never seemed to take responsibility seriously, almost as though he was running from it. Which made sense in retrospect.

Springer worked his jaw, but he retreated, though not without a glare at Megatron. "I will not apologize," he said, but his tone toward Rodimus was much more respectful. "We need to leave. Now. Before the taint of this ramshackle aerie infects us further."

Megatron snarled.

Hot Rod stomped a foot, his talon scraping a furrow. "That is enough," he barked, one palm lifted nearly to Springer's nose. "You will be silent, Captain, or I will inform Sire that you violated the Accord not once, but twice. Am I understood?"

The pale blue and white to Springer's left coughed into his hand. "Perhaps, my prince, if we departed, it would ease the tension."

"It might, Topspin." Rodimus tilted his head. "But I am not leaving. Not yet. I want an answer first."

Springer's eyes widened, but he pressed his lips together, saying nothing. Hot Rod's chastisement had worked, and it made Megatron all the hotter to see him carrying that weight of authority. He would be a fine leader in his own right someday.

No more protests were voiced. Perhaps only Springer dared push the boundaries, and now that he'd gone too far, no one else wanted to risk Hot Rod's anger.

Hot Rod slowly lowered his hand and turned back toward Megatron, confidence in the set of his shoulders.

"Did you mean what you said?" he asked, something raw in his voice. Raw and desperate and yearning.

"I wouldn't have said it if I didn't." Megatron closed the distance between them, ignoring the warning growl coming from Springer's direction. "I wish you'd stay."

Hot Rod's breathing hitched. "Even though you're in love with another?" he asked, though he was kind enough to soften his vocals, so that only those nearest could hear.

It hurt. Megatron didn't bother to pretend it did not. But he held his ground and dipped his head, as a chastened mate might, or a liege apologizing to a flockmember he'd wronged.

"Love is a multifaceted thing," he murmured. "I will always love Orion, but it is different to what I feel when I look at you."

Hot Rod swallowed thickly, his tongue wetting his lips. "Until last night, you carried no interest. You denied me. What could have changed?"

Adaptus.

Megatron's breathing quickened. He glanced around him, aware of their audience, and knew he might have to reveal his deepest shame.

"I will tell you." Megatron prayed that Hot Rod would grant him this boon. "But it is between you and me, not anyone else. It's not something I want to share in public." He reached out, waiting for Hot Rod to move away from him, and when the smol did not, Megatron stroked the back of his knuckle against Hot Rod's throat, where the marks of his teeth were visible. "If there is any regard in your core for me, I beg you to let me have this chance."

Hot Rod's breathing hitched. He tilted his head back, offering more of his throat to Megatron. "You never needed to beg."

"My prince!" Springer's expression filled with dismay. He took a step forward, but Hot Rod lifted a hand, cutting him off.

"My sire will just have to live with the disappointment," Hot Rod said without looking back at the captain. "I've waited far too long for this to walk away now."

Springer looked aghast, and Megatron could hardly blame him. He had little doubt that the Magnus would be displeased for his captain to return without his quarry.

"Are you certain?" Megatron asked as he stroked his knuckle up and down Hot Rod's throat, tracing the outline of every bite.

Hot Rod shivered. "I am." He rested his hands on Megatron's chest, right below his feathermane. "Captain, you will tell my sire I am safe, and that I will return home on my own accord or with my

mate within six lunar cycles. That should pacify him.”

“Minor Rodimus, I must protest.” Springer’s armor clanked noisily as he took another step forward. “Your sire won’t be happy if I return without you. We have failed too many times already.”

Hot Rod growled, his fingers curling against Megatron’s chest as he directed a look over his shoulder. “This is not failure. You found me. But unless you intend to drag me out of here in chains, I’m not leaving.” His tail feathers raised, almost in threat. “Don’t test me.”

It was escalating again. Megatron needed to defuse the situation.

Megatron stood straighter and whistled, loud and sharp. It was enough to cut through the tension, forcing all eyes his direction.

“Perhaps the captain will be pacified if we offer him and his soldiers hospitality for the evening,” Megatron suggested, perhaps a touch over-loud, but it had the intended effect. “That way he might provide escort no matter the outcome, yes?”

Hot Rod stared at him, something wounded in his eyes. “But I thought--”

“Shh.” Megatron brushed his knuckle over Hot Rod’s bottom lip. “We will talk, and we’ll decide what comes next. But we can’t do anything while the Elite Guard makes everyone uneasy. It is only polite.” He met Springer’s gaze over Rodimus’ shoulder and grinned, showing off his pointed teeth. “After all, I would not want to be mistaken for a mannerless Raptor.”

Hot Rod twisted his jaw. “That’s not fair,” he said as he poked Megatron in the belly. “Grimlock has been nothing but polite to me.”

“You’re right. My mistake.” Megatron tipped his head in apology. “Grimlock has always shown the best manners unlike recent visitors.” He looked up at Springer. “We’re not mannerless *birds*.”

Hot Rod sniffed. “Somewhat better.”

Megatron grinned.

Springer, at least, had the decency to give the tiniest twitch of shame.

“My liege’s suggestion is the perfect solution,” Soundwave stepped up next to Megatron and Sunstorm joined him, as though they’d already worked out this course of action. “Priest Sunstorm will show you a place where you can rest, refresh yourselves, and eat to your core’s content.”

Megatron’s grin widened. “Trust that your prince is in very capable hands.” Springer’s guard were lucky that Grimlock’s usual rooms weren’t the only guest quarters available. Though it amused Megatron to think of the haughty captain resting in a nest once used by a Raptor. Springer would probably hate that if he knew, though Grimlock and his pack always left the quarters immaculate once they departed.

Springer’s plumage went rigid. He visibly clenched his teeth before jerking his head into something resembling a respectful bow. “We appreciate your hospitality, Liege Megatron,” he gritted out.

“Excellent!” Sunstorm chirped and flounced forward, every inch the gracious host. His bright gold feathers caught the dawn light, shimmering around him. “Please come with me, and I’ll be happy to

show you to your accommodations.”

Megatron did not move, only held Hot Rod to his chest, and watched Sunstorm lead Springer and his Elite Guard warriors away. He displayed confidence, while his internals were a knot of anxiety. He was about to share his deepest secret with the smol who had captured his heart, and the fear of rejection reared its ugly head.

Once Springer's unit was gone, Megatron addressed his flock.

“I appreciate every one of you coming to my aid.” He smiled warmly, and loosened his plumage to reassure them. “Feel free to return to your nests and your duties. I will make a formal statement at supper.”

The crowd dispersed. Even Soundwave dipped his head in a bow and left Megatron alone. No doubt he was already arranging for someone to keep an eye on their unexpected guests. Megatron had a feeling Springer wasn't one to sit idly by and wait for answers.

“You owe me answers,” Hot Rod said as he flexed his talons, the tips of them briefly digging into Megatron's chest.

He covered Hot Rod's hands with his own. “You'll get them. Will you come with me to my nest?”

Hot Rod visibly shivered, his eyes going dark and hungry. “If only you knew how much I've been wanting to hear you say that.” He leaned closer, smelling sweet and tempting. “Yes.”

Megatron swallowed and took Hot Rod's hand in his, lest he kiss Hot Rod here and now, forgetting about the talk they needed to have. It was hard to believe that it was barely dawn since he'd awoken to find his worldview shifted.

As he led Hot Rod back to his nest, not because Hot Rod needed the guidance but because it seemed the right thing to do, another realization came over Megatron.

In all of this, he hadn't once thought of Orion. He'd thought only of Hot Rod, of keeping the pretty smol in his life no matter the cost.

Perhaps things were changing after all.

Chapter 12

Something a lot like anxiety settled on Megatron's shoulders. It quivered in his core, made his breathing quicken, and his hands tremble. He pulled Hot Rod into the privacy of his nest, and closed the heavy tapestry, praying they would not be disturbed. This was a secret Megatron did not want shared.

In the stillness, silence descended. It was a moment of truth. So Megatron braced himself and drew in a slow, careful breath. He turned toward Rodimus, mentally reviewing what he meant to say, only for Rodimus to suddenly throw his arms over Megatron's shoulders and drag him into reach. Hot Rod's tongue pushed into his mouth as he pressed against Megatron, molding their bodies together.

Megatron loosed a startled sound into the kiss, desire rising to the forefront, determined to chase away the anxiety of the moment. He greedily inhaled Rodimus' scent, wrapping his arms around the smol's body and holding Rodimus tight against him. If this was going to be the last he ever tasted Hot Rod, well, he was going to indulge for all it was worth.

He deepened the kiss and closed his eyes. Rodimus' scent surrounded him, hot and sweet and hungry. The smol was warm as he squirmed against Megatron's front. He warbled in his throat, tangling their tongues together.

Rodimus broke off the kiss to nip at Megatron's lower lip. "That was the hottest thing I've ever seen," he breathed, his eyes bright pools of blue. "I never thought... you always..." He broke off, breathing hitched. "You really meant it, didn't you?"

Megatron reluctantly lowered Rodimus to the floor. It took the same effort to unwind his arms from Rodimus and loosen Rodimus' arms from his shoulders. He kept the Iacon prince's hands in his, however, relishing in the warmth of Rodimus' grip.

He wondered how long he'd be able to keep it.

"I did," Megatron said. He swallowed over a lump in his throat, savoring the taste of Rodimus on his tongue. He'd never forget it, he was sure. "I also meant it when I said there are things you need to know before you decide if I'm the mate you want."

Hot Rod's eyebrows drew down. "Why wouldn't you be?"

Megatron sighed and pulled Hot Rod away from the door. He didn't want to be anywhere someone might overhear his greatest shame.

"There's a reason I've not taken a mate or a lover, even after Orion mated Shockwave and that avenue was closed to me," Megatron started, a flush of cold running through his veins. He couldn't remember a time he'd felt so nervous.

Shame heated his face, and disquiet knotted his internals. "I am... I don't... I can't..." He trailed off, frustration rumbling in his chest.

He couldn't even bring himself to say it. He was a coward of the worst kind.

Hot Rod frowned. "Look, if you're not attracted to me or something, just say it. I mean, you could

have said that a long time ago without coming up with all kinds of excuses. If you don't want me, okay, I get that. I can take a hint.”

Megatron shook his head. “If I didn't want you, I wouldn't have taken you last night. This isn't about that.” He pushed the heel of his palm against his forehead. “I've always wanted you, Hot Rod. I just knew it couldn't mean anything, and I didn't want to put myself in the position of being rejected.”

Instead, he'd given that pain to Hot Rod and anyone else who ever dared show an interest. Fortunately, only Hot Rod had been so determined to linger, when all others had given up on their temporary desire.

“Okay. Then why?”

Megatron dropped his hand and looked at the smol he wished to mate. Hot Rod who was a prince of Iacon, Rodimus Minor, and certainly deserved better than some broken Crystal City reject. As Springer had so aptly called him.

Megatron drew in a long breath.

No.

He was Liege of Kaon. He was strong and mighty and loved by his flock. He could handle rejection. It would not break him.

“Because I am incapable of siring or carrying,” Megatron answered.

The words sounded odd aloud. They made him flinch. It was like admitting it aloud made the truth all the more real, reminding him of the opportunity they'd taken from him and the position he would have had to surrender. He'd left Crystal City because he thought he couldn't be happy there, and then made all the same mistakes in Kaon. He'd brought the shame with him, when he could have left it behind.

Megatron sighed and stared hard at the far wall, a safer view than whatever disgust surely darkened Rodimus' face. “I don't know why. The physicians suspect I was born this way. It doesn't matter, I suppose. There's nothing they can do. As a mate, I'm worthless.”

“I don't understand.”

Worse that Hot Rod sounded genuinely confused.

Megatron gnawed on the inside of his cheek. He drew on a well of patience he didn't know he possessed. Was Hot Rod trying to be cruel?

“You turned me down because you can't produce fledglings?” Hot Rod continued, his tone raising in pitch. “But that's... that's ridiculous! Who cares? Why is that the one thing that's important?”

Megatron stared at him. “It's basic instinct,” he replied and now it was his turn to be confused. “What am I to defend if not a nest? Or my mate and my fledglings? I lost a position in Orion's guard because of it!”

“Then they're idiots because you are clearly the best one for the job, virility or not.” Hot Rod rolled his eyes. “And then you brought that Crystal City nonsense here with you. To Kaon. To Liege

Megatron's flock of acceptance. Do you even hear yourself right now?"

Megatron gaped at him. This was a Hot Rod he hadn't known existed. This responsible, knowledgeable Hot Rod who could look up at him with both rationality and affection.

Hot Rod sighed and cupped Megatron's face gently. "Listen, I chose you because of who you are, not the fledglings you can give me, which by the way, I don't even want." He paused to offer a wry grin. "In case you haven't noticed, as much as I like the little ones, I don't go sparkly-eyed over them."

"I noticed." Megatron cracked a soft smile. "I assumed you'd grow out of it."

Hot Rod scoffed again. "Grow out of it? How young do you think I am?" He brought Megatron's face closer and brushed the tips of their noses together. "I want you as my mate. I want you to take me, to claim me, to make me yours."

Megatron's breathing hitched. He swallowed thickly, heat pooling throughout his body. He rested his hands on Hot Rod's hips, feeling the heat of the smol beneath the fluff of his feathers. He wanted to believe in this.

"Your sire would disapprove." It was weak, so weak, a last-ditch effort to escape from a rejection he still feared.

But in this, Rodimus was stronger than him.

"Yeah, well, it's not his choice to make." Hot Rod pressed a soft kiss to Megatron's lips. "And if you think I'm going to walk away because of him, clearly you don't know me at all."

Megatron pulled Hot Rod into his arms. "You are stubborn and persistent," he said as he pressed their foreheads together. "I underestimated you. I won't make that mistake again."

"Good," Hot Rod breathed. "Does that mean you're going to mate me?" He rolled his hips, pushing hard against Megatron's front.

Megatron chuckled and nuzzled his way down to Hot Rod's neck, where he mouthed at the marks from their rut last night. "I think it is too soon for that." He cupped Hot Rod's rump, giving it a light squeeze. "But I will no longer run away from you. So long as you tell me some truths that I'm owed as well."

Hot Rod groaned and clutched at Megatron's chest, his talons digging in with light pricks. "Right now? When we're getting to the good part?"

"Yes, right now." Megatron nipped at Hot Rod's chin, forcing himself to ignore the tempting sweetness of Hot Rod's mouth. "Why did you leave Iacon?"

Hot Rod squirmed. "Do we really have to talk about that?"

Megatron returned one hand to the relative safety of Hot Rod's hips. "Yes." He caught a knuckle under Hot Rod's chin, tilting the smol's face toward his. "You put my flock in danger, Hot Rod. I deserve to know why."

"Rodimus," he corrected, and his face darkened with a blush. "I mean, if you want to call me by my

actual name.”

Megatron conceded. “I’ll call you whichever you prefer, but that’s avoiding the question.”

Rodimus’ shoulders sagged, his crest feathers drooping. “I know. It’s just that... everyone is here for a reason. They’re escaping something. They were searching for somewhere to belong.” He looked away, since he couldn’t turn his head. “I left Iacon because I was bored. Because I was looking for something I couldn’t find there. I wanted the strongest, and I knew I wouldn’t find him in Iacon.”

“That’s still a reason.”

“Yeah, but not a good one.” Rodimus sighed and looked at Megatron again, though his eyes lacked their usual brightness. “I was happy in Iacon, a little isolated and lonely maybe, but I was treated well. I didn’t have any reasons to complain. And then I came here and pretty much everyone else escaped their own flocks in some way or another, and I don’t know... I just feel selfish.”

Megatron stroked the back of his knuckle over Rodimus’ cheek. “We all have our reasons. Kaon is a sanctuary, yes, but that doesn’t mean it’s a requirement.” He chuckled lightly. “And I have to admit, a part of me is honored you left to find the best, and decided it was me.”

Rodimus’ face heated beneath his finger. “Well, you know, there’s a lot to like about you.” He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth and tilted his head into Megatron’s touch. “You take in everybody, and you look out for everyone, and you care for everyone no matter what role they have in the flock. If you’re not the best, I don’t know who else could be.”

Megatron’s core throbbed at the frank confession. Temptation won. He pressed his lips to Rodimus’, keeping the kiss gentle, savoring. It flashed heat through his body nonetheless, as his clava remembered all too well how it had felt to be within Rodimus last night.

Rodimus made a small sound in his throat, a cross between whimper and moan. He pushed harder against Megatron, trying to deepen the kiss, his tongue plunging into Megatron’s mouth.

Megatron held the princeling closer, until there was no space between them. Hunger clawed through him, his clava threatening to emerge. He conjured up several memories of Rodimus and savored the sweet kiss. He wanted nothing more than to pin Rodimus down again, to fill the wet heat of Rodimus’ antrum, and to clamp his teeth on Rodimus’ throat in permanent claim.

He wanted to mark Rodimus as his, so when morning came and Captain Springer continued to be an annoyance, he would have no wing with which to fly. Rodimus would be Megatron’s and not even Ultra Magnus could whisk him away.

He wanted to, but right now, Megatron wouldn’t. He and Rodimus needed to build a bridge before they could risk crossing the canyon.

Megatron eased out of the kiss, ignoring the warble of need in Rodimus’ throat, and cupped the smol’s face. He pressed their foreheads together so they shared breath between them.

“I am glad that you never gave up on me.”

Rodimus shivered and rolled his body hard against Megatron’s. “I am nothing if not determined, my liege.” His hands scraped down Megatron’s front. “But if you are not to mate me yet, will you at least rut with me? Mark me? Stake a claim?” His movements became more urgent with each breathless

request.

Desire twisted into a knot within Megatron.

He kissed Rodimus' forehead and left a trail of kisses down the center of Rodimus' face. He swore that Rodimus smelled of berries and the summer breeze. It made his internals tighten with need. Megatron growled as he tilted Rodimus' head back and mouthed at his throat. Rodimus' pulse fluttered against his lips, strong and rapid.

"There are other matters that demand my attention," Megatron murmured as he pressed a gentle kiss to Rodimus' throat before he scraped his teeth over the barely visible marks he'd left the night before.

Rodimus arched against him. "And I, your mate-to-be, don't count?" His voice had the edge of sly humor and false offense in it hinting of his royal upbringing.

Megatron chuckled and gripped the lithe smol's hips to pull Rodimus against him. Legs wrapped around his waist. Their featherdown met, grinding together, exchanging damp between them. Rodimus' clava began to emerge, leaving a wet streak on Megatron's featherdown.

"Very well." Megatron lost the battle against his own need. "But then we both have responsibilities to meet and you have explanations to give."

"Fair enough." Rodimus tossed his head back and cried out as he rubbed harder against Megatron's featherdown. Slick leaked from his antrum, heat flooding outward. "Just take me already, and we can talk politics all you want later. *Please.*"

Megatron growled and stumbled toward his nest, lowering Rodimus into it and climbing over him, blanketing Rodimus with his body. "All I want?"

Rodimus squirmed, spine arching, thighs trembling around Megatron's hips. "Anything," he cried, throat bared, slick dampening Megatron's featherdown and painting the head of his clava.

"You may regret offering me such," Megatron said against Rodimus' throat, over the marks of his previous bites.

Rodimus moaned. "More?" He clutched at Megatron's shoulders, rutting against him, purring with need.

"Whatever you wish," Megatron murmured and dragged his lips to Rodimus' ear. "My consort," he purred.

Rodimus shivered against him, whimpering low in his throat. Megatron tightened his hold on Rodimus' hips, hips firmly notched between Rodimus' thighs, his clava teasing the damp folds.

Rodimus canted his hips invitingly, his talons raking over Megatron's shoulders. He moaned, tongue sweeping over his lips. He was an invitation Megatron couldn't resist. Swallowing thickly, Megatron rolled his hips, sliding deep into Rodimus, his clava slowly enveloped in silken heat.

Rodimus keened, pleasure flushing his face a pretty pink. His plumage lifted all at once, his thighs wrapping hard around Megatron's waist. His head tipped back and back, baring the vulnerability of his throat, and Megatron's mouth watered.

He latched his teeth onto Rodimus' throat, as his hips snapped out and back in again, thrusting deeper. Rodimus' antrum rippled around him, clenching and unclenching as though trying to drag him into a mating lock. It wasn't uncommon for a newly tried smol to react in this matter. Even if it was pointless. Outside of mating season, there would be no hatchlings.

Then again, there wouldn't be any for them anyway.

Megatron released Rodimus' throat, ignoring the smol's whimper of disappointment. His hips juttured forward, his clava throbbing. He wanted so badly to mark Rodimus as his forever, to latch his teeth onto Rodimus' neck and bite deep enough to scar.

It was hard to resist, and Megatron did not know that he could. He forced his pace to slow before he eased out of Rodimus.

"Why are you stopping?" Rodimus demanded. He arched up, the damp of his feather down calling for Megatron's clava.

"Reasons." Megatron grabbed Rodimus' hips and turned him onto his front.

Rodimus squawked, struggling to get his hands beneath him. He flicked his tail out of the way, revealing the quivering folds of his antrum. Megatron had a moment of debate, where his mouth watered, and his clava throbbed, before the need to rut won the battle.

Megatron nudged a knee between Rodimus' thighs, grasped his hips, and pulled Rodimus back onto his clava. Another growl echoed in his chest as he was swallowed by the gripping heat. Rodimus' throat was thus harder to reach, reducing temptation.

It wasn't a perfect solution. He'd have to leave Rodimus in this bed for that, but it would remind him to be careful.

Rodimus tossed his head back. "Never mind," he panted as he pawed at the blankets, talons kneading the fabric. "This is good, too."

Megatron chuckled. He kept one grip on Rodimus' hip, but his other hand crept forward, fingers tangling in the softer curls of Rodimus' plumage. He leaned over Rodimus' back, and felt his clava shift within Rodimus, sliding over previously untouched territory.

Rodimus shuddered from head to toe. His antrum squeezed down, and he gasped out a moan.

"I thought you might like it." Megatron curled over and around Rodimus, until he could look into the smol's face and get a clear view of the heat of desperation in Rodimus' eyes.

The smol whimpered, fluid pulsing out of his antrum and slicking the feathers between them. He panted, sharp and desperate.

"You are stunning," Megatron whispered. He brushed his lips over Rodimus' forehead, his cheeks, his nose. He rolled his clava in and out of Rodimus' antrum, a slow and steady pace to drive the smol wild with want. "It's a miracle I kept my talons off you for so long."

Rodimus' eyelids fluttered. His tongue flicked over his lips. "Your willpower... is impressive," he said with a little laugh.

Megatron chuckled and captured Rodimus' lips, his tongue sliding into Rodimus' mouth as though to claim. Upside-down, the kiss took on a whole new texture, and Rodimus shook beneath him. His antrum rippled and squeezed faster, his hips moving back against Megatron in increasingly urgent motions.

He was already close. Which was good, because Megatron felt himself teetering on the edge of release. Rodimus' scent filled his nose, soaking him to his core, stirring up the need throbbing through his veins.

He rocked harder into Rodimus, shifted his weight, and curled an arm around Rodimus' body. The pads of his fingers briefly skirted over Rodimus' clava, making the smol buck into his hands and moan, until the tip of his thumb found Rodimus' nub. He rubbed it in a firm circle, and a warble rose out of Rodimus' throat.

"More," Rodimus panted, his rump pushing hard into the cradle of Megatron's groin. "Please, Megatron."

He nuzzled the crook of Rodimus' neck, savoring the frantic flutter of Rodimus' corebeat. His lips grazed a warm and wet path around Rodimus' ear, breathing in deep of the smol's sweet scent. "Anything you want." He rubbed harder, thrusting into Rodimus as he manipulated the plump, throbbing nub.

Rodimus gasped out a laugh. "I'm pretty greedy," he moaned, pushing harder into Megatron's thrusts, his antrum rippling with hunger.

"So am I," Megatron growled, his fingers sticky with Rodimus' slick as he rubbed and caressed that nub. "I want your pleasure. I want to feel you come around me. I want to hear you moan for me."

A low whine slipped out of Rodimus' mouth. "T-take it," he stuttered, back arching into the curve of Megatron's body, his talons rending the fabric beneath his hands.

"I won't have to." Megatron slid his palm up the length of Rodimus' clava, rubbing the head of it into the curve of his hand. Rodimus made a choked sound, thrusting into his palm. "Because you're going to give it to me."

His mouth found the back of Rodimus' neck. The smol whimpered, pushing back against him as if begging.

Megatron's mouth watered. He nibbled on the back of Rodimus' neck before the squeeze of Rodimus' antrum drove him to bite. Not hard, not enough to scar, but enough to hold Rodimus in place.

Rodimus keened, rump grinding against Megatron's groin, pushing Megatron deep. He stroked his palm down Rodimus' clava one last time before finding his nub and pressing against it, fingers slippery and the nub throbbing hungrily.

Rodimus made a choked sound as release wracked his body with tremors. He trembled in Megatron's grasp, whining his pleasure.

Megatron growled against the back of Rodimus' neck, trying to hold to self-control, but was helpless to the pleasure as he was dragged into his own ecstasy, lost to the feel of Rodimus beneath him.

Mine, Megatron thought. Mine to keep, mine to claim, mine to have.

His teeth tightened, ever so fractionally. Rodimus gasped, another smaller orgasm making his antrum flutter and tighten around Megatron's clava as he filled Rodimus with his spill. He shifted his hand to Rodimus' belly, holding the smol against him, as his hips ground against Rodimus, clava emptying spurt after spurt into Rodimus.

The pleasure whited everything out for several wonderful seconds, until Megatron crashed back into his own body. Rodimus whimpered beneath him. He pushed into the cradle of Megatron's body, visibly trembling.

Megatron tightened his grip around Rodimus' middle as he sat back on his heels, gently releasing his teeth from where they'd locked around the back of Rodimus' neck. He licked the marks. He'd drawn blood, but not too much. He hadn't mangled Rodimus at least.

Rodimus lolled against him, limp as he fell into Megatron's arms, his head resting on Megatron's shoulder. Megatron's softening clava slipped free as he shifted until he was seated. He turned Rodimus in his arms, cradling the smol in his lap. He cupped Rodimus' face with one hand and brought their lips together for a soft kiss, the taste of it sweet on his tongue.

He nuzzled Rodimus, his core throbbing hard and hopeful. If he was lucky, they could get through this. They could form a relationship. Perhaps someday, Megatron would be brave enough to ask, and Rodimus would still care for him and say 'yes'.

"Mmm. Can't we just stay like this for the rest of today?" Rodimus asked as he carded his fingers through Megatron's feathermane.

Megatron pressed his head to Rodimus', sliding a hand down Rodimus' back. "You know why we can't."

"Thought I might ask anyway." He tried to bury his face in Megatron's chest. "I finally got what I want and here he comes, ruining it."

Megatron assumed he meant Springer.

"There's nothing ruined. Only responsibilities that must be handled first," Megatron corrected. Desire still simmered in his body, but he had mastered himself for years. He could certainly do so now. Even if Rodimus curled in his lap like a delectable treat.

Rodimus sighed. "Responsibilities. And here I thought I escaped those."

Megatron chuckled and stroked Rodimus' back again, the smol arching into his caresses like a feline seeking affection. "You do realize if we fully mate and you become liege-consort, you will have all those responsibilities you left behind?"

"Fortunately, I still have my training. I also don't mind if it's with you. And here in Kaon. Things are better here." Rodimus started to purr, his body going even more limp, as though he intended to take a nap right in Megatron's lap.

"I won't argue with you there." Megatron closed his eyes and allowed himself to indulge in this moment. "Though I still wonder why you chose me."

“I thought I answered that.”

“Vaguely.”

Rodimus kneaded his talons against Megatron’s chest. “I can’t explain it. All I know is that I left Iacon because I was looking for something, and when I got here, I found it in you.”

That was unexpectedly romantic. It reminded Megatron a lot of Bulkhead as well. Bulkhead was convinced that romance would find him. That he had a soulmate out there, and he didn’t know who or where they were, but as soon as he saw them, he’d know they were meant to be. There would be a feeling, a *zing* as he called it. Apparently, his whole flock believed in the zing so strongly they wouldn’t mate without it.

Which might have been the reason their population was on the decline.

Megatron turned his face against Rodimus’ crown, inhaling his sweet scent. “For what it’s worth, I’ve always been charmed by you. I let my own insecurities get in the way of accepting your courtship.”

“That and the fact you still love Orion.”

A sigh slipped free. “I do,” Megatron admitted. “But I’m starting to realize that it is a different kind of love. It is an ideal, I think, of what I always thought love should be. And even after Shockwave, I clung to it because loving Orion was safe. I knew it would never be reciprocated.”

“Whereas I’m dangerous.”

Megatron chuckled. “So to speak.”

“I’m about as dangerous as a wet mesh cloth, but I see your point.” Rodimus shifted so he could look up at Megatron. “Speaking of responsibilities, I’m going to have to talk to Springer.”

A cold shock cut through the warmth of the moment. “Of course. We should clean up and do that now.”

Megatron lifted Rodimus, setting him on his own feet, and stood as well. Their groins were liberally splattered with fluids, and while Megatron would rather he laid Rodimus down and licked him clean, perhaps now wasn’t the time to get either of them started again.

“I should talk to him alone,” Rodimus said, his talons curling and uncurling against the woven branches of the floor.

Megatron cast him a sharp look. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Rodimus held up his hands. “Look, Springer’s never going to believe I’m here and want to stay by my own choice if you’re there, looming over my shoulder like some kind of slaver or owner.” His shoulders straightened, pulling that mantle of royalty all over again.

“If you go alone, how do I know he’s not going to toss you over his shoulder and forcefully return you home?” Megatron demanded. Unease rippled through his body, along with an undercurrent of fear. To lose Rodimus so soon after accepting him...

Rodimus shook his head. "He won't do that."

"You're certain?"

"Yes." Rodimus moved to Megatron's washbasin, pulling another cloth from the rack. He'd have more laundry in the future, Megatron mused. "Orion and I are a lot alike. Springer is to me, what you were to Orion."

Megatron folded his arms. "So he's your personal guardian?"

Rodimus dampened the cloth and wiped at his body, half-turned as though trying to gain some privacy. "He's only a few mating seasons younger than me. Except he's warrior caste. His whole life, he's only known one thing, that his duty is to protect me. I snuck out of Iacon under his watch, and he'd only just taken over the captaincy from my previous guardian. Youngest ever to do that, by the way." Rodimus actually sounded proud of his guardian. "So finding me has been a matter of honor."

"And even with that, you don't think he'll drag you back?"

"I trust him." Rodimus gave him a soft smile. "I know he's rude and aggressive, but he's not really like that. It's just because he was worried." He dipped the rag in the water again, squeezing out the excess. "Once he sees I'm happy, and I willingly made this choice, it'll be different."

Megatron scrubbed at his face. "Would that I had your faith." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "There will be guards at the main entrance and outside the door nevertheless. I don't intend to lose you unless you intend to leave."

"Which I don't." Rodimus sauntered close, but only to offer Megatron a damp rag. "Not now that I finally have what I want." He rose on the tips of his feet as if to kiss Megatron, but was still too short to reach.

Megatron acquiesced to bend down and close the distance between them, brushing his lips over Rodimus'. Every kiss begged for more, and only self-control kept him from sweeping Rodimus in his arms and taking him back to the bed.

"I'd still much rather stay here in this room, kissing you," Rodimus said against his lips.

Megatron chuckled. "Those damn responsibilities." He stole one more kiss before he tore himself away from Rodimus, accepting the offer of a wet rag to clean himself. "My flock will have many questions, and I'm sure they are unnerved."

"They trust you. Whatever you say will calm them down." Rodimus grinned, though it wasn't as confident as Megatron thought it would be.

"I certainly hope so." Megatron tossed the dirtied cloth into the laundry bin. "Let's go. I think we've had more than enough private time."

Rodimus' lips formed a cute pout. "There will never be enough," he purred, but he took Megatron's hand in his, tangling their fingers together.

Together, they left the security of Megatron's nest to face the responsibilities waiting for them. Megatron wasn't sure what to expect, but several harpies lurking outside his door was not one of

them. It was a wee bit embarrassing, actually, considering the noise he and Rodimus had been making.

Soundwave wasn't a surprise.

Starscream, leaning against the wall almost out of view, was.

Rodimus squeezed Megatron's hand. "Pretty sure he's here for me. I'll be right back." He let go and jogged toward Starscream, leaving Megatron alone with Soundwave.

What was that about?

Megatron knew Hot Rod and Starscream had gotten close. Just as he knew Hot Rod had taken to sleeping in Starscream's nest as part of his rotation. But Hot Rod had also never been taken. Were he and Starscream together or not? Was it a casual thing?

Soundwave made a wordless noise, drawing his attention. Buzzsaw currently sat on his shoulder, half-dozing as he leaned into Soundwave's neck. "Captain Springer and guards resting in guest chambers."

"Good." Megatron turned away from Rodimus and Starscream, their conversation too quiet to hear across the distance. "Were they cooperative?"

"Yes."

Also, good. Maybe Rodimus was right to believe in Springer. Maybe the captain could be trusted.

"Did you know our mysterious group was an elite guard phalanx?" Megatron asked as he gave his Speaker a long look. He trusted Soundwave implicitly, but his Speaker had a habit of withholding information as part of some scheme for Megatron's own good.

Buzzsaw stirred, blinking sleepily at Megatron. "Brother knows everything," he said with a slow drawl. "Including that they weren't a threat."

Megatron rumbled in his chest, though he knew better than to offer anything but a warning to his second. "You knew they were coming for Hot Rod because you knew he was Rodimus. You recognized the flag from Grimlock's description."

Soundwave nodded. "Affirmative." He tilted his head, visor turned in Rodimus' direction. "The secret was Hot Rod's to keep."

Of course it was. Sometimes, Soundwave could be downright frustrating. Not that Megatron could fault him for it. It was Megatron's own rule after all. If Soundwave had deemed Springer's unit not to be a threat, then they certainly weren't.

At least, not to Megatron's flock. To Megatron's happiness, well, that was another matter entirely.

Megatron sighed. "You've always known Hot Rod was Rodimus, yet you encouraged me to mate with him."

"All members of Kaon flock are entitled to a clean slate," Soundwave said, his voice raspier than usual. "To be judged for who, not what they are." He grimaced, the pads of his fingers rubbing over

his throat beneath the edge of the mask.

In other words, Minor Rodimus' status was irrelevant. What mattered was how Megatron felt about Hot Rod aka Rodimus, and whether or not he wanted to pursue a relationship with the beautiful smol. Which he did.

"What about the flock?" Megatron asked, because Soundwave was right of course. He was always right. Sometimes, it was downright frustrating. "Is anyone angry? Upset? Unsettled?"

"Curious," Buzzsaw chirped. Pale yellow feathers ruffled. He tucked his face behind the edge of his brother's mask.

"Not everyone present for Elite Guard arrival. Many unaware they're here. Others speculative, but none afraid. Trust in Liege's leadership," Soundwave added with a dip of his head.

Well, that was a relief.

"I do intend to explain later." Megatron exhaled softly. "As much as I can give without betraying anyone's confidence, at least. Much of it is up to Rodimus to declare."

Speaking of...

Rodimus bounced back up to them, all smiles and bright feathers. "Well, that went better than I thought," he chirped. His crest canted forward, tail swishing jauntily across the ground.

"What went better?" Megatron peered over Rodimus' shoulder, but Starscream was gone.

"Is that jealousy I detect?" Rodimus laughed and snuggled up into Megatron's side. "And no, he was just a little mad that I never told him who I was. He also wanted to congratulate me about you."

"I'm not jealous," Megatron said.

Rodimus snorted. "Sure you're not." He burrowed into Megatron's side, smelling sweet and pliant.

Megatron wanted nothing more than to take Rodimus into his nest and spend the rest of the day making him squirm with pleasure. After finally allowing himself to have what he wanted, to be thwarted by circumstance was aggravating.

Damn responsibilities.

"Soundwave will escort you to speak with Captain Springer," Megatron said with a meaningful look in his Speaker's direction. There was no one he trusted more to look after his lover. "He'll make sure there's a guard outside. Just in case."

Rodimus sighed and knocked a light fist against Megatron's chest, below his plumage. "I've told you there's nothing to worry about. Springer's not going to do anything."

"Be that as it may, for my own peace of mind, I'd be more comfortable with a guard. Maximus, I think." Megatron tapped his chin. "He's big, intimidating, and difficult to rile. He should be able to handle Captain Springer's aggressiveness without causing a political incident."

Rodimus groaned, slumping against Megatron's chest. "Fine. If you insist."

“I do.”

Rodimus slipped away from Megatron and loosed an aggrieved sigh. “Lucky that I find how protective you are so charming.” He grinned, his plumage fluttering around his face in an unfairly beguiling manner.

He was more himself now, Megatron realized. There was an air of something around Rodimus, as if a cloak of confidence had settled around his shoulders. It wasn’t the outrageous flirtatious persona he’d always had before, but something else. Something deeper.

It was intoxicating.

“Well, I’d better go calm Springer down. He’s probably ranting and working himself into a righteous froth. Honestly, Spin’s a saint for being able to put up with that without punching him.”

“Spin?”

“Top Spin. Springer’s second. Actually older, but you wouldn’t be able to guess that by the way they act.” Rodimus drew back further and swept a hand over his crest, making his feathers stand on end. He looked down his body as if in one final check for evidence of their coupling. “They’re both going to nanny me.”

Despite himself, Megatron smiled. Rodimus sounded annoyed, but fond. More than that, he sounded unconcerned. He had no fears about Captain Springer, and no worries he’d be dragged away. Megatron would trust in his confidence.

“Soundwave will accompany you,” Megatron said. “I’ll tend to my flock in the meantime. Good luck, Rodimus.”

His mate-to-be winked. “No worries, darling. This is one thing I know how to handle.” He looked up at Soundwave with a grin. “Shall we?”

Soundwave made a noise and gestured for Rodimus to precede him. Buzzsaw twittered a laugh and scuttled over his brother’s head to sit on his other shoulder, closer to Rodimus.

“Tell me about Iacon,” he asked as his long tail swished back and forth where it hung over Soundwave’s shoulder and down his back. “Is it pretty? Is it big? Is it shiny? Do you have blueberries?”

Rodimus laughed as they walked away. “Yes to all of that, Buzz. But it’s not as fun as being here in Kaon. There are a lot more rules to follow.”

Buzzsaw had always been one of the more curious of Soundwave’s siblings. His quiet reserve hid an intense longing to travel, but Soundwave worried he might not be capable of it. He and Laserbeak were small, even for smols. Fully grown, Megatron guessed they would barely rise to Soundwave’s waist.

Soundwave suspected they might actually be of the pygmy race of harpies. Considering they were too young when they were taken from their parents and in the custody of humans when found, it was still too soon to be sure. Either way, Soundwave would never allow the twins to travel anywhere on their own.

It simply wasn't safe.

Megatron rolled his shoulders and turned around. He had responsibilities after all. He needed to check on his flock. He needed to reassure those who might be uncertain. He had to make sure Springer's unit wasn't wandering around causing trouble. He needed to go see Orion and check in on all the hatchlings.

He had much work to do.

Spending more time with Rodimus would have to wait.

Chapter 13

Megatron headed to the upper levels first. He passed no few members of his flock, some of whom were concerned Rodimus would be leaving. Kaon flock as a whole was fond of Rodimus, though truth be told, there were few disagreements between flockmembers. Everyone learned to get along or face expulsion back to their own flocks.

Megatron reassured as best as he could. He told them not to be concerned about the Elite Guard's presence. There would be no battle or war. Everything was under control.

Whirl had been a little disappointed. "If ya ask me, we could use a good fight. Throw our weight around some," he'd said with a cackle. "Gets a little stale around here sometimes, boss."

"We have little weight, Whirl," Megatron had replied, amused despite himself. "But I'll see if I can't find something to keep you entertained."

"Nah. Don't worry about it. Cyclonus is occupyin' me for now."

Cyclonus, hm? How interesting. Though Megatron hoped that wasn't an allusion to how often they fought. Megatron's flock could certainly be lively when it suited them.

Whirl had winked then, which was a little disconcerting considering he had only the one eye and a patch over the other. But he'd loped along after that, leaving Megatron free to continue on his way.

Megatron stopped by the pantry, snagging a few fresh-baked granola bars to serve as the breakfast he'd missed. He washed them down with orange juice, desperate to keep himself distracted from worrying about Rodimus.

The dining hall was empty as it was mid-morning, but he could hear the hustle and bustle of the chefs preparing for the midday meal. Laughter and conversation floated out, both of which were a relief. No one sounded stressed or concerned, if anything, their ease bled a confidence in Megatron's ability to protect them.

Pride bloomed in Megatron's chest.

He checked on Terradive and Rotor first, but the curtain over their door was closed, and no light filtered through the fabric. He couldn't hear any sounds save that of even breathing and some snoring, so he presumed they were all sleeping. Which was good. New parents should sleep whenever they managed to find the time.

Radiance and Windfall were the next corridor over, on an inner ring of the residential floor. They'd requested the standard privacy time, but they granted Megatron entrance when he rang the bell they'd hung outside their nest.

Windfall was comfortably arranged in the bed, their hatchling sleeping on his belly as he read a book. The little ball of fluff had his nose tucked into his knees. Radiance sat in the opening to their balcony, elegant fingers deftly weaving the thin strands of a basket. He was their chief artisan, often holding classes and seminars to help newcomers learn new, useful skills. Drift dabbled, but Radiance was a master. The tapestry hanging over Megatron's door had been woven by him.

“We are well, Liege. Thank you for asking,” Radiance answered without looking up from his work, no doubt so he wouldn’t lose his place. “Trailbreaker has been checking in on us frequently.”

They were from the same flock, Megatron knew. Trailbreaker had been the first to come to Kaon. Radiance and Windfall had followed not long after, once receiving word from Trailbreaker that they could find shelter from discrimination in Kaon.

“That’s good to hear.” Megatron looked fondly at the sleeping hatchling. Nova’s colors were starting to brighten. He would be quite lovely.

“He told us about the Elite Guard phalanx when he came by this morning.” Windfall turned a page in his book, careful not to jostle the tiny bit on his stomach. “If you have need of one of us, let us know.”

Megatron shook his head. “No matter what happens, I wouldn’t pull a new parent away from their hatchling. Your first responsibility is to Nova and then to each other. All else is tertiary.”

Windfall smiled, his violet eyes slanting toward Megatron. “And that is why we follow you, Liege.”

It warmed him to his core to hear such things. No matter how long he’d lived in Kaon, and how long he’d led his flock, there were times uncertainty gripped him. The trust of his flock was worth all the treasure in the world.

“Let me know if there is anything I can do for you,” Megatron said. “Rest well.”

He excused himself, leaving them to their cozy family moment. Once, such a scene would have left him with a pang of envy and regret.

No such emotion haunted him this time. He only felt calm, blessed for their happiness, and pleased that he was part of something that made their joy possible.

Letting Hot Rod into his life had changed so many things already. While it hadn’t been so much as a full day since they’d begun the tentative steps into a relationship, it felt right. He and Rodimus might not have that cozy moment, as hatchlings weren’t a possibility, but that feeling of family, of contentment, was certainly in reach.

He’d left Orion and Shockwave’s nest for last.

When Megatron arrived, the curtain was closed to afford them their privacy as they’d requested, but he also knew it didn’t extend to him. They’d said as much. He could hear soft music playing, which meant they were all awake. He ducked inside, rapping his knuckles on the frame to announce himself.

The three were curled in the nest, Shockwave with Orion tucked under his good arm and their little one in a nest of blankets between them. Cleaned and dry, the brilliant blue of the hatchling’s feathers were all the more vibrant.

“Megatron.” Orion looked up with a smile, one that held more energy than it had the last time Megatron had seen him. “You look well. Given all the commotion we heard, I’d started to worry.”

Megatron lowered himself to a crouch by the nest. He rested his elbows on his knees. “And what threat do you think I can’t handle?”

Shockwave chuckled. "That's what I tried to tell him." He stroked Orion's shoulder. "You know how he worries."

"I am right here, you know," Orion scolded with a roll of his eyes before he focused on Megatron. "What are we missing?"

Megatron sighed. "A lot actually." So much had happened overnight. He wriggled his fingers. "The basic gist of it is that Hot Rod is actually Rodimus Minor, heir to the throne in Iacon. We currently have an Elite Guard phalanx in our guest quarters, trying to decide if they are going to leave with or without their missing prince."

"That is a lot," Shockwave said. His prosthetic hand lifted before dropping again in an aborted motion. "Iacon is notoriously protective of their royals, to the point of isolating them. I'm surprised Hot Rod managed to slip their guard."

"He's quite devious if you give him half the chance," Orion said with a little chuckle and an acute look at Megatron. "What an interesting coincidence, considering you must have mated him last night."

Megatron choked on his next breath, heat flaring in his face. "I... what?"

Orion chuckled. "I've known you too long not to tell the difference, Megatron. You've rutted recently, and I don't know anyone else in this aerie who has captivated you half as much as Hot Rod." He tipped his head. "Or perhaps I should call him Rodimus. Hm. I'll simply have to ask him which he prefers."

"You sound rather certain he'll choose to stay," Shockwave said.

"I would bet he already has." Orion gave Megatron a shrewd look. "Am I wrong?"

Megatron lowered himself down to a full seat, curling his legs beneath him. "You're not wrong. I asked him to enter a courtship with me."

"That's great!" Shockwave said.

"I'm happy to hear it." Orion grinned, his eyes sparkling. He snuggled more into Shockwave's side. "You've been alone far too long, brother. I am glad for both of you."

The tiniest of chirps seemed to agree with both of them. They all looked down to see the hatchling stirring, arms stretching as his eyes fluttered open. Bright blue, just like his carrier.

"Well, look who's awake," Shockwave murmured as he carefully offered his prosthetic hand to his hatchling, little fingers clutching at the false fingers. "We were being too rowdy, I suppose."

Orion tickled the little one's belly. "It's about time he woke up anyway. If he sleeps too much now, he won't sleep tonight."

"Have you named him yet?" Megatron asked.

"Yes." Orion sat up and tipped the hatchling into his hands, the bitlet protesting with a squeak and a kick of his feet. "Shhh, little one. I'm just introducing you to your godsire."

Megatron's eyes widened. "Oh, Orion. I don't think--"

"Hush." Orion's grin was half-mischief, and his tone one Megatron had always been weak against. "Hold out your hands."

Megatron gnawed on his bottom lip as he obeyed, his core throbbing with a familiar ache. The hatchling was fully awake now, squirming in his carrier's hands as he protested. He was probably hungry as well.

"Megatron, meet your godling. This is Arcee," Orion said as he deposited Arcee into Megatron's hands, the little, warm body so light and delicate.

Megatron had held many a hatchling and fledgeling in his decade living here in Kaon. But never one so young, never a newling. Arcee's bones felt light and breakable. His feathers were so soft and malleable. He squirmed and fidgeted, but looked up at Megatron with challenging eyes.

Heat gathered in the back of Megatron's eyes. "Hello, Arcee," he murmured as he offered a thumb for the hatchling to grasp. "It is nice to meet you."

It wasn't envy. It wasn't regret. It wasn't pain or hurt.

Megatron's mouth curved into a smile. He looked at Orion, so snug and happy in Shockwave's embrace, his eyes soft as they looked at his hatchling. He loved Orion even now. That would always be true.

But he didn't burn for Orion. He didn't long to take Orion into his arms and make him squirm and sigh. He wondered if he ever had. Perhaps he'd been mistaken all along, confusing his love for Orion with a desire for intimacy. He'd never noticed how much that desire had lacked heat.

"Thank you," Megatron murmured as an unusual peace washed through his body, chasing away the tension and gloom that had been part of his life for so long. "I promise to always protect him."

Orion's hand fell over his, forming a protective cradle around Arcee. "If you protect him even half as hard as you watched over me, then I know that no harm will ever come to him."

"Never," Megatron promised and felt the weight of that promise settle over him. It didn't feel like a burden, however, but a gift.

He gently eased Arcee back into his carrier's hands with a final stroke to the blue hatchling's crest.

"You and Arcee are my family," Megatron said as he sat back. "There is nothing that will ever change that."

"I know." Orion patted him on the arm with his free hand. "I love you as one of my own, the brother I've never had. You are part of mine as well."

Megatron waited for the crush of sadness. The sting of knowing said love would never be romantic or otherwise. He waited for an emotion that didn't come. By Adaptus, but he'd been so blind, so stubborn!

There were all kinds of love.

Orion was comfort, memories of home, laughter and childhood and affection. But he wasn't the harpy Megatron wanted to mate. His love for Orion had always been one of longing – a family he thought he couldn't have, a mate he thought he couldn't cherish.

What he felt for Rodimus was something wholly different.

"If there is ever anything you need, don't hesitate to ask," Shockwave said, his tone warm and not the least bit challenging. "Families look out for each other. Especially considering what's going on right now."

Megatron nodded. "Thank you. But I'm sure it's going to be all right. Hot Rod – Rodimus – has assured me he wants to stay, and he can trust the captain not to force the issue."

"That must be a relief." Orion settled back against Shockwave, tucking himself into his mate's embrace. "I've always thought you two would make a good match."

"Is that so?" Megatron asked with a laugh. He propped his chin on his elbow. "You and everyone else in the flock, I think. I must have been the only one deaf and blind."

"Perhaps a little foolish as well," Shockwave said. He tilted his head against Orion's, snuggling close. "But that is all right. Love makes fools of us all. In a good way, however."

Megatron chuffed. "I am *not* in love with Rodimus."

Orion draped Arcee over his chest. The hatchling snuggled in, clinging to his feathers. "Only time will tell."

"All right." Megatron pushed to his feet, stretching his arms above his head to ease the cramp in his body. "I'm going to leave before you start getting poetic on me."

Shockwave chuckled. "He can't help himself. He has the core of an artist, our Orion does." He stroked Orion's shoulder. "It is one of many reasons I fell for him."

Orion's feathers fluttered. "Don't you start," he murmured. "We already have one newling to care for. We can wait to work on another."

Megatron barked a laugh as Orion's face pinked, and Shockwave's smirk grew bigger and broader. They were adorable together. Relief that Orion had found the happiness he always wanted poured through Megatron like liquid warmth.

Shockwave nuzzled into the side of Orion's neck, making him giggle. "Practice makes perfect, love."

Megatron groaned and backed toward the door. "Enjoy your morning, you two. I'll come by and check on you later. Bring dinner if you need it."

He left before their behavior became any more nauseating. They'd always been an affectionate duo, but with the impending and recent arrival of their hatchling, it had increased tenfold. Perhaps it was a touch of envy as well. Megatron couldn't snuggle with his intended right now, much less engage in any other activities.

Instead, he had work to do.

Megatron drew the curtain back over Orion and Shockwave's door, wishing he had some type of 'Do Not Disturb' sign as a warning for other potential visitors. Though he might also consider sending someone with a few meals and mush for the little one.

He needed to meet up with Soundwave as well. The world moved onward, and Megatron wanted to make sure the Gatherers were still heading out, the Cradle was staffed, and his flock ran smoothly. He turned around, and nearly tripped over his own feet out of surprise.

"Almost afternoon boss!" Rumble greeted with a beaming smile full of teeth. He rocked on his tarsals, hands behind his back, twice as energetic and mischievous as his twin. "Big bro's busy, but he wanted me to pass along a message to you."

"Did he now?" Amused despite himself, Megatron grinned. He turned toward the main corridor, and Rumble fell into a skipping pace beside him. "And what was it?"

"Hot stuff is still talking with the new folks, and there's a lot of yelling, but no violence, so don't worry," Rumble said. "He's got someone around to intervene if Big Green seems like he's gonna take your lovey and run."

He could always rely on Soundwave.

Megatron lifted his head. "That's good to hear. I trust Soundwave will let me know if I need to speak up."

"Course." Rumble jostled him with an arm, bony elbow digging into Megatron's outer thigh. "Congrats by the way, boss. Glad you finally got Hot Rod in your nest. It's about time."

A laugh vibrated in Megatron's chest. "I appreciate the congratulations."

Rumble skipped ahead of him and started walking backward, his grin full of teeth and mischief. "Is he as hot as they say? Bet you stayed up all night in the nest with him, huh? I saw all those marks, boss. Did he get any sleep?"

"Don't you have work to do?" Megatron demanded as he felt heat tug at his face. He refused to blush and give Rumble the satisfaction of seeing him flustered. Sometimes, he forgot how downright audacious the twins could be.

Rumble giggled. "Yeah, yeah. I'll leave you be, boss." His tailfeathers swept the floor with an amused flick. "I'll be with bro. Call us if you need us." He sketched off a playful salute before he scampered away.

Megatron shook his head and continued on. The twins were a handful and a half. It was amazing Soundwave could keep them tamed as well as he did. They obeyed him like no other.

With the new parents comfortable and unconcerned, Megatron headed back to the lower levels. He might as well get started on the stack of paperwork on his desk. Or...

He paused. He could look in on Drift and see if he had any lessons for the day. He could check on the lunch preparations. He could review their food storage, especially given the multiple parties over the past couple weeks and their recent visitors. Hadn't the Raptors only left less than a week ago? He

also needed to make sure that whatever Hot Rod's assigned duty for the day was, someone else could take over for him.

He could do anything but attend to the paperwork on his desk, truth be told. Why add insult to injury?

Megatron turned a corner to jog down the narrow walkway connecting one side of the floor to the other – a strange growth in their home had necessitated a slight shift in the construction of the interior. Rather than a wide, smooth path, they'd built a suspended rope bridge spanning the gap in the flooring.

Starscream waited on the other side, his crossed arms and focused stare suggesting that it was Megatron he waited on. Though how he'd known where to find Megatron was a curious thing.

"Can I beg a moment of my liege's time?" Starscream asked as he unfolded his arms and tucked them behind his back. There was deference in the sag of his shoulders, the way his feathers lay carefully flat against his body.

"You don't need to beg, Starscream." Megatron stepped off the walkway and gestured for Starscream to accompany him. "Will this require privacy? Do you want to wait until we get to my office?"

The pretty smol shook his head. "No. That's not necessary. I just didn't want to delay you if you had something important."

"Nothing that can't wait. Walk with me?"

Starscream matched him, step for step. Though he was a smol, and as such, smaller than Megatron, he still came up to Megatron's shoulder. He was rather tall, and there was something about him that gave off an air of confidence better suited to a bara. Not that it was a bad thing. Small wonder, however, he had come to Kaon.

They continued on, moving slowly through what Megatron and the rest of his flock playfully deemed 'Shopper's Row'. They didn't have a currency as such, but the artisans and collectors and traders had stands set up here for the curious harpy to browse and acquire, if they so choose. There was a communal supply depot for the necessities, but Shopper's Row was for fun.

"I don't have a problem or anything, if that's what you're worried about," Starscream said. "I wanted to talk to you about Hot Rod."

"You mean Rodimus."

"I said what I meant." Starscream's lips quirked toward a grin. "He's still Hot Rod to me, the little fibber. Besides, it was Hot Rod you took to Nest."

"Ah." Megatron scratched at his jaw and gave Starscream a sidelong look. "Do I owe you an apology for that?"

"An apology?" Starscream reared back, blinking at him. "Why would you-- oh, wait. Did you think we were courting?"

Heat stole into Megatron's face, if only because Starscream looked so outraged, Megatron felt foolish

for even thinking it. “Clearly, I’m mistaken.”

Starscream chuckled. “Yes. Clearly,” he said in a dry tone. He tucked his hands behind his back again, though this time it appeared more as comfort than deference. “No, Hot Rod is merely a friend. As it so happens, I have my eyes on someone else.”

“Care to share?”

“It’s complicated.” Starscream’s eyes softened, something in his gaze turning wistful. “Perhaps even pointless. Only time will tell.” He tilted his head toward Megatron. “You, however, have a very obvious opportunity and chance here. And I’d like for you to not, errr, frag it up.”

Megatron blinked. Was that a chastisement or a warning? Encouragement? “I see.”

“Good.” Starscream rolled his shoulders, his feathers fluttering and settling in an odd, crimson wave. “You and Hot Rod are a good match. I’m glad you finally pulled your head out of your rump. But I just want to make sure you know to treat him well. Not that I think you won’t. I just want you to know there’s someone looking out for him.”

Starscream looked up at him, more challenge in his eyes than Megatron could have expected, strength where he’d been so meek on his first arrival. Megatron was glad for the change, glad Starscream seemed to have come into his own. He was also, he had to admit, a little impressed that Starscream would overcome an ingrained submission to implicate a threat on Hot Rod’s behalf.

“I intend to do right by him.” Megatron drew to a halt so he could face Starscream and express his sincerity. “But I wish to thank you as well.”

Starscream blinked, his crest feathers straightening. “For what?”

“Hot Rod has always been a valued member of our flock, but I and many others haven’t failed to notice he occasionally kept himself apart from us,” Megatron explained. It had always come to his attention that Hot Rod was friendly and well-liked, but he’d never been particularly close to anyone. “I appreciate that not only have you befriended him, but you wish to protect him. Since you’ve come here, he’s been more open with everyone.”

Starscream’s mouth open and closed before he shook his head. “I’m not sure that’s something I should be thanked for.” He looked away, head ducking, his crest feathers flicking. “I like him. If I hadn’t ever met Blurr, and you’d outright refused him, maybe I would’ve even courted him someday. Not that I would have had a chance, considering he’s been in love with you from the start.”

Who the frag was Blurr?

Megatron blinked.

Wait.

“Love?” Megatron echoed, his core quickening a beat. He’d known Rodimus wanted him, but love?

Starscream’s eyes rounded. He looked flustered as he abruptly backpedaled and waved a hand in front of his face. “I did not say that,” he said firmly, cutting a palm through the air. “You did not hear it from me because that is a conversation you need to have with Hot Rod and not with me.”

Megatron swallowed thickly. A heat flushed through his body. Love? It seemed impossible. Hot Rod or Rodimus barely knew him. They'd interacted only as a flockmember and a liege, excluding last night's intimate encounter. Love?

"And that's why, right now, I'm going to turn around and walk away and you're not going to ask me any questions," Starscream continued, almost babbling now, as he backed another step. "So long as we're both clear on the fact you're going to be as good to Hot Rod as you possibly can be, so I don't have to turn into your worst nightmare."

Megatron nodded, feeling more than a little speechless. "I intend to treasure him," he said, mouth dry and a quiver in his belly. "For as long as he'll let me."

Love!

"That's all anyone can ask for," Starscream said in a rush and tipped his head in a hasty bow. "Excuse me, I think I just remembered Perceptor needed my help with something." He spun on a tarsal and leapt from the edge of the walkway, gliding down to the atrium floor in a blur of bright red.

Megatron watched him go, amusement warring with surprise, all tempered by the echoes of Starscream's accidental slip. The urge to see Rodimus, to speak with him, took over all else. He knew it wasn't possible at the moment, not with Rodimus no doubt deep in conversation with his guard, but the desire still rang strongly through him.

Paperwork would not be anything close to a suitable distraction now. It would let his mind wander far too much. No, now he had too much restless energy. He needed to move. Perhaps the training room then.

Megatron spun and found the nearest upward ramp rather than fly. Climbing the long way would help burn off the fidgets. Maybe Starscream was mistaken. Maybe it was something he inferred rather than was told.

He needed to examine his own feelings, Megatron realized. He didn't think he could call it love, not quite yet. But he did hold a deep affection for Rodimus. He was definitely attracted to Rodimus, and the urge to claim, to keep Rodimus by his side was present as well. But love?

Megatron didn't know. It wasn't the same as what he felt for Orion, he knew that much. It was hotter, brighter, more fierce. Perhaps it would cool with time, settle in his core like a warm blanket, a tight embrace, the sweet fragrance of claim.

The scent of blackberries wafted by, catching Megatron's attention. He paused as he passed the dining hall, nose tugged in the direction of the brick ovens. The sweet aroma grew stronger, and his belly rumbled. His breakfast had been not long ago, but he couldn't resist the promise of whatever had been freshly baked.

Had someone wheedled Drift into making his famous jam?

Megatron poked his head inside and found the dining hall mostly deserted. It was the calm before the storm as lunch would be served shortly. Drift was present at the table closest to the kitchens, and he wasn't alone.

Rodimus was with him.

Megatron's core throbbed with warmth. His future consort looked a little flustered, lips twisted into an annoyed pout, his feathers flat against his body as he all but draped himself on the table. He looked like he was whining to Drift, who was smiling and laughing quietly. He nudged something closer to Rodimus, and Rodimus perked, his crest feathers twitching.

Megatron found himself crossing the floor before he made the conscious decision to do so. Starscream's words echoed in the back of his mind, and he was desperate to know if there was any truth to them. But he also hesitated to ask because it was a secret not meant to be his yet.

Drift noticed him first. He grinned at Megatron, and even winked, as he nudged Rodimus with a flick to the fiery smol's nearest ear.

"I know something else that's going to cheer you up," Drift said, almost singsong.

"You have raspberries back there, too?" Rodimus asked as he sat up straight, his tail swishing over the bench.

Drift laughed. "You know those are out of season, Rodders." He tipped his head, gesturing to Megatron. "I'm talking about him."

Rodimus looked up as Megatron got within range, and Megatron swore his entire face lit up. His eyes grew bright, and he smiled as he leapt from the table and threw himself at Megatron.

Megatron grunted as he caught the smol, and barely had time to catch his breath before Rodimus' mouth was over his, tasting sweet, like the blackberries which had first caught Megatron's attention. His tongue was hot and eager, his body hot as he wrapped his legs around Megatron's waist and Megatron was quick to cup his rump.

Rodimus purred, leaving little nips on Megatron's lips, nuzzling him. "Missed you," he murmured as he nibbled along Megatron's jaw.

Megatron chuckled and caught Rodimus' mouth for another kiss, slow and savoring this time, his core throbbing slow and hot. Maybe it was love after all.

"It's only been a few hours," he said as he brushed their noses together.

"Feels like days when you're arguing with someone." Rodimus sighed as he pressed his forehead to Megatron's. "What about it? You and me, we run away and leave Springer here to stew?"

Megatron gave Rodimus' rump a squeeze before he set Rodimus back down on the ground. It wouldn't do to canoodle in public like this, even if Drift was the only one around to see it.

Or was. He'd vanished in the past thirty seconds, perhaps to give them a semblance of privacy.

"If only we could," Megatron said as he cupped Rodimus' face with one hand, stroking his thumb over the smol's cheek. Rodimus leaned into the touch, his eyes fluttering. "What did he say?"

"He doesn't like it, of course. Doesn't think you're good enough for me." Rodimus turned into Megatron's palm, pressing a kiss to it. "It's not his decision, and I told him that much. He's agreed to carry the news back to Sire at least. There won't be any more unwanted Elite Guard visits from now

on.”

Megatron raised his eyebrows and firmly told his clava to stay sheathed, no matter how soft and wet Rodimus’ lips were. “It was that easy?”

“Arguing with Springer is never easy,” Rodimus snorted and stepped into Megatron’s arms, burying his face against Megatron’s chest. “I do have to go back eventually though. To tell my Sire and Carrier in person so they stop fretting.”

A reasonable request. It meant Megatron would have to accompany him, as Rodimus’ mate, provided of course Rodimus accepted his marks.

“Fair enough.” Megatron stroked down Rodimus’ back, soaking up the warmth of his intended, wishing he could simply take Rodimus back to his nest and love on the smol until he had no more energy to spare. “Though we’ll be grateful to not have any more unexpected visits.”

Rodimus snorted a laugh against his chest. “Sorry. I would’ve warned you about it, but I wanted one more chance before the truth came out.”

Megatron looked down and tilted Rodimus’ head up toward him. “You knew they were coming?”

A flush colored Rodimus’ cheeks. “I asked Grimlock about the flag and connected the dots. I knew then I was out of time.” He nibbled on his bottom lip. “It was why I came to your nest that night. I figured I had nothing left to lose.”

“I am glad you took the chance. If you hadn’t, I would have regretted losing you,” Megatron murmured. He stroked his thumb over Rodimus’ lip, aching to kiss him again, but worried he might not be able to stop if he did.

Now would have been the perfect time to ask, but still, Megatron hesitated. It felt like a precious treasure. He wanted to wait for Rodimus to say it on his own.

“When are Springer and his company going to leave?” Megatron asked as he forced himself to withdraw from Rodimus’ arms, instead tugging the smol over to the table he’d abandoned.

There was indeed blackberry jam here, and what looked like fresh biscuits. Someone had been spoiling Rodimus. Megatron sat down and intended to pull Rodimus next to him, but the smol plunked down in Megatron’s lap instead, and Megatron couldn’t refuse him. The desire to hold Rodimus close was too strong.

“In the morning.” Rodimus leaned against him, tucking his head under Megatron’s chin. “Spin said they need the rest, so I allowed it.”

“Harsh little princeling, aren’t you?”

Rodimus chuckled. “Give Springer an inch, and he’ll take a mile. Can’t let him have any wiggle room.”

Megatron stroked a hand down Rodimus’ back and scooped up one of the jam-covered biscuits, offering it to Rodimus. “Invite them to join us for supper. Perhaps that will help assuage some of your guardian’s fears.”

“Or it could provoke a fight.” Rodimus took the bite and nipped at Megatron’s fingers playfully, making a little hum in his throat.

“Do you think I’ll lose?”

“I think that it doesn’t matter who wins, we all lose. It’s a political nightmare waiting to happen.” Rodimus sighed and nuzzled the underside of Megatron’s chin. “But you’re right. Hospitality is a key tenet of the Tyrest Accord. So long as Springer behaves as he should, there might not be any problems.”

Megatron’s insides tightened. There was something unbelievably arousing about Rodimus speaking so competently. He was so much more than the flighty youth he’d always pretended to be.

“I am glad to hear it.” Megatron fed himself one of the blackberry biscuits, before Rodimus made a sound of want, prompting Megatron to offer him another doughy bite. “It’s important we maintain good relations with Iacon. Especially since I have no intention of surrendering their prince to them.”

“I’m the middle child, they’ll get over it.” Rodimus wriggled in his lap and caught Megatron’s hand, nibbling on his fingertips. “We should go back to your nest while we still can.”

Megatron chuckled. “There will be time for that later. There are still conversations to be had, and responsibilities to handle.”

“Ugh. Talking. When has that ever gotten me anywhere.” Rodimus nuzzled Megatron’s palm before letting his hand go. “What’s left? We discussed the important bits. You want me, I want you. All that’s left is the mating.”

“It’s not that simple. I would like to get to know you a little first, *Hot Rod*,” he said with an emphasis on the name that he’d always known his intended by.

Rodimus groaned. “Why do you choose now to make sense?” He wriggled, his rump rubbing on Megatron’s thighs. “Are you sure I can’t convince you otherwise?”

Megatron deftly ignored the flush of heat in his groin. “I’m quite sure you could convince me. But that you shouldn’t is the key point here.” He grabbed the last biscuit to keep his hand from sliding up Rodimus’ thigh. He ignored the mental image of laying Rodimus upon this table, and making a meal of him.

“I know. It won’t be long until everyone starts trickling in for lunch.” Rodimus squirmed until he was nestled as close to Megatron as possible. “But we can have this for a few more minutes, right?”

Megatron wrapped his other arm around Rodimus, resting his chin on top of the smol’s head. “Yes.” Today had the capacity to be even longer. He intended to soak up whatever he could of Rodimus until they could be together once more.

But now that he had Rodimus’ attention...

“Rodimus, about Orion...”

A hand tangled in his feathermane, talons lightly scraping the skin beneath. “You don’t have to say anything.”

“Yes, I do.” Megatron stroked Rodimus’ back, a purr rising in his chest, one he hoped could soothe the suddenly stiff smol. “I do love him. But I want you to know, it’s not what you think. It’s not even what I think. He’s family to me, but that is all.”

Rodimus made a noise Megatron couldn’t interpret. “That was a pretty quick change of core.”

“More like, I finally identified what was already there,” Megatron corrected. “Sometimes, when you spend too long building up something in your head, there comes a point when you realize it’s not what you thought it was. Sometimes, what you think is romantic love, turns out to be misplaced.”

He paused and inhaled deeply, bracing himself. “If all I had to do was mate you tonight to make you mine, I would have done it. But knowing what I know now, I just want to make sure you don’t fall for the same trap. Understand?”

Rodimus’ talons scraped his chest again. “I know what my own feelings are,” he muttered, but then he sighed, long and loud. “But I get your point. I waited years for you to take me to nest. I can wait a little longer for you to mate me.”

“Good.” Megatron scooped Rodimus out of his lap, to a cute little squawk from his intended, and set Rodimus on the table in front of him.

Like this, they were of a height, and Megatron could kiss him with ease. He kept it slow and gentle, tasting without teasing. They couldn’t do much more than kiss, exchanging the sweetness of blackberries between them. Not with the noise Megatron could already hear in the hall, of his flock heading this way for lunch.

He cupped Rodimus’ face with his hands and pulled back, his thumbs stroking over Rodimus’ cheeks. “Go spend time with your guardian. Reassure him. And I’ll see all of you at dinner.”

Rodimus’ tongue flicked over his lips. “And after dinner?” His crest quirked upward, betraying his anticipation.

“After we’ll go for a flight, I think,” Megatron said as he dabbed Rodimus’ face in quick kisses. “And then I will take you back to my nest where you will spend the night with me. You don’t have to find another nest again.”

Rodimus hummed and laid his hands over Megatron’s. “Sounds perfect.” He leaned in, stealing Megatron’s lips for another kiss.

Perfect was definitely right.

Chapter 14

Dinner came long before Megatron was ready for it.

He'd passed along that their visitors would be joining them to those of his flock in charge of the evening meal, and then been promptly shooed out of the kitchens as they became a frenzy of activity. He had no idea what they had planned, but when he walked into the dining room later that evening, he boggled at the impressive spread they had arranged.

There were vegetable pies and more fresh biscuits with plenty of Drift's jam to go around. Juices and fresh water and honeymeade filled deftly arranged pitchers to the brim. Bowls of the freshest fruit were carefully scattered across the tables for those who preferred unprepared meals. They'd baked and mashed both red potatoes and sweet potatoes. Loaves of oatmeal bread had been neatly sliced and set out with plates of fresh-churned butter, the latter of which they received from the humans.

Megatron hadn't ordered them to impress the Iaconians, but apparently his cooks and bakers had taken it upon themselves to do so. They hovered in the kitchen, peering through the doorway, stares set on the new arrivals as if daring them to be unimpressed.

Springer and his five soldiers were given point of pride in the center of the room, where Megatron sat with them, Soundwave and Rodimus to either side of him. The others, Megatron had learned, were Top Spin, Twin Twist, Pyro, Sandstorm, and Ironfist. All but one were baras. None were mated, so it came as no surprise to Megatron that they gave appreciative looks to the unmated in Megatron's flock, some of whom fluttered around the Iaconian guard like hungry butterflies.

To be fair, it wasn't every day Kaon welcomed visitors such as these. They usually welcomed either the Raptors, or the beaten and downtrodden desperate for a refuge.

Megatron waited for everyone to be seated before he stood. He lifted his hands, calling for silence, and didn't speak until the low murmur of conversation vanished.

"I'd like to start tonight by thanking our chefs for the wonderful meal they've provided. They have truly outdone themselves," Megatron said with a smile in the direction of the kitchen. "I would also like to welcome our guests to supper, which is always a meal shared in Kaon, so that we may all come together at least once a day." He gestured toward Springer and his entourage. "Please be as courteous to them as you would one of our own. Now without further ado, everyone enjoy."

Megatron sat.

He wasn't one for elaborate speeches, and he rarely spoke for evening meals like that, but he didn't want the Elite Guard leaving Kaon and believing them to be a flock of heathens either. They had their traditions, no matter how ridiculous it might seem to those from such a grand aerie.

Conversation began in earnest once Megatron sat, and his flock started to help themselves. Maybe they didn't have servants running around like in Iacon, but it was still a good dinner.

"So Megatron," Springer said as he examined the food on his plate with a critical eye. "What Aerie did you say you were from?"

Rodimus narrowed his eyes at his former guardian. "What does it matter?" His hand tightened

around the handle of his utensil.

“It’s just curiosity, Roddy.” Springer forked a steamed slice of squash into his mouth. “Aren’t all the harpies here from somewhere else?”

Megatron rested his elbows on the table, lacing his fingers together. He would wait to eat. “Yes, that is correct. Until we established our aerie here, Kaon had no native-born harpies and had only seen the occasional visitor.”

“Megatron’s from Crystal City.” Rodimus glared hard at his guardian, as if trying to warn him against stirring up trouble. “He was guardian to the Prime’s heirs.”

“And stole away with one, if the rumors are correct,” Springer commented with raised eyebrows.

“Orion Pax left of his own accord,” Megatron replied, refusing to rise to the bait, for he knew what Springer intended to imply. “It was, in fact, his idea to come to Kaon.”

“Was it now?” Springer rose, hands braced on the table, craning his neck to peer through the gathered members of Megatron’s flock. “Is he here? I’d like to ask him what prompted his decision to leave.”

Megatron worked his jaw. “He and his mate are in their nest for the standard privacy days after the successful carry and hatching of their first little one. He is not to be disturbed.”

“How convenient.” Springer tilted his head toward the harpy next to him – Top Spin if Megatron remembered correctly, who whispered into his ear. Amber eyes narrowed. “Am I hearing this right, Liege Megatron? Orion is the one who carried?”

Megatron tilted his head. “You sound surprised. You do know that all harpies are capable of carrying, yes? Or don’t they cover basic reproduction in Iacon?”

Someone down the table poorly concealed a snicker. Megatron didn’t have to look to know it was Rumble. He and Frenzy had been watching the conversation with wide eyes, jostling one another with their elbows.

A growl echoed in Springer’s chest. One of his guards, the pale yellow one, laughed. “He’s got a point, Springs,” the harpy said.

Springer hissed at his subordinate and directed a glare at Megatron. “That is not the point here. I seem to recall both of Sentinel Prime’s heirs being baras.”

“They are.” Megatron unlaced his fingers and focused on his food. He’d selected one of the vegetable pies, and the scent of eggplant made his mouth water. “Here in Kaon, any who wish to carry may do so, regardless of class.”

Springer’s crest flicked. “How liberal of you.”

“That’s the point, Springer,” Rodimus bit out, all but vibrating in place next to Megatron, as though his outrage couldn’t be contained. “Kaon is free. They don’t have any stupid restrictions. You can mate anyone you want. You can carry if you want. You can be whatever you want, and no one’s going to make you do anything you don’t want.”

“It sounds chaotic,” Springer commented.

“Actually, I think it sounds kind of nice,” Top Spin said with a wistful note to his voice. He idly sucked jam from his talons. “Harpies in Iacon are so stiff sometimes.”

Springer’s attention swung toward his second, his crest high and rigid with outrage. It didn’t seem to perturb Top Spin at all.

“We welcome everyone here,” Megatron said, offhand. He would not be bothered by some whelp from Iacon who hadn’t an ounce of understanding of what Megatron’s flock had gone through just to survive. “It is the core tenet of what Kaon stands for. And I will fight to the last beat of my core to defend it as such.”

“So how many different flocks would you say are represented here?” Top Spin asked, perhaps in a bid to change the subject to something less incendiary.

“At last count, twelve,” Soundwave answered before Megatron could finish the calculations in his head. “At the moment, our population stands at 118, including hatchlings.” He effortlessly forked a flaky fruit tart into his mouth, but that he’d removed his mask was telling. Perhaps he thought his scars and intense stare would encourage their visitors to think twice about threatening Kaon.

Megatron approved.

“My Speaker answers truthfully,” Megatron said with a nod, because he trusted Soundwave’s counts more than his own. “I know we are a small flock compared to many, but we are ever growing. I am unconcerned about our future.”

“Your relationship with the humans is pretty weird,” pointed out Ironfist, easy to recognize as he was the only smol. A pale, grey blue, he was short and stocky, and bristling with weaponry. “Most harpies are afraid of them.”

“With good reason,” Springer muttered. “Humans are nothing but trouble.”

“The humans here are educators and scientists. Their only interest is to learn from us, not exploit us,” Starscream commented from Hot Rod’s other side. He’d cleaned his plate and now rested his crossed arms on the table. “We have nothing to fear from them. Instead, we have benefited from their proximity.” He gestured upward, to the strings of lights draped across the ceiling. “Their many gifts have made life easier.”

“Right. Their gifts.” Rodimus snorted a laugh and gave Starscream a pointed look. Whatever that meant.

It made Starscream flush and poke Rodimus with his elbow. “You hush,” he hissed, and straightened, clearing his throat. “The point is, the humans are our allies, and hopefully, our relationship with them here can begin the process of building bridges with humans planet-wide in order to obtain more rights for all harpy-kind.”

This was news to Megatron. He hadn’t realized Starscream was working so hard as a kind of political liaison. It was impressive. He would have to ask Soundwave about it. Though he had little doubt his Speaker already knew and had approved the venture.

Springer looked skeptical. “If you say so. Frankly, I don’t think humans can be trusted. I’d watch my

back, if I were you,” he said, pointing a fork at Starscream. “Else next thing you know, you’ll find yourself sold to the highest bidder.”

“It would be a shame to loop all humans into the same category,” Megatron said smoothly, unable to resist the opportunity for another dig. “After all, not every harpy is an uptight rumpstick without a sense of humor.”

Down the table, Rumble and Frenzy didn’t bother to hide their laughter. They slid out of their seats from their amusement, chattering to each other in that special language they’d developed, as Soundwave hissed at them and shooed them on.

Springer’s feathers ruffled. His nostrils flared. “Manners can be taught,” he said in a tight tone. “Respect for the sapience of another species is slower in coming.”

“Exactly. You can’t learn what you don’t know needs to be learned,” Rodimus pointed out as he leaned a little to his left, bumping shoulders with Megatron. “And that’s what Starscream is doing. The more he can prove to the humans that we are deserving of protection and equal rights, the more we can convince them to stop treating us like creatures to be bought and traded.”

Warmth flooded Megatron. There was something irresistibly intoxicating about Rodimus speaking so knowledgeably, so confidently. It was like he could wear and cast aside his mantle of authority as if it were made of cloth, easy to set aside or pick up as needed. That flexibility of his was undeniably alluring.

“It’s impressive. I admire your dedication to the attempt,” Top Spin said diplomatically. “If you are successful, we’ll all benefit.”

“You got anyone here from Taurus?” the pale yellow Harpy abruptly asked, leaning forward into view.

“Sandstorm,” Springer warned in a low tone. His glare spoke chastisement, but it seemed to sail right over Sandstorm’s head.

“Several, point of fact.” Megatron tilted his head to the next table over, where Roadbuster and Trailbreaker occupied an end with Drift and Perceptor. “Drift is our Fencemaster, though he came here by way of Iacon. I’m sure he’ll be up for a demonstration after supper, if you’re interested.”

It was easy to guess what about the Taurans intrigued Sandstorm. The massive blade slung across his back made it quite obvious.

Sandstorm perked up considerably. His gaze followed Megatron’s to the end of the table, no doubt zeroing in on the two Megatron had indicated. “Do they spar?”

“If you ask politely,” Megatron said with a little laugh.

Sandstorm abruptly stood, wiping his mouth with a napkin, his sheath clinking. “I can be polite,” he said and swept up his plate of food. “Promise not to start any wars, boss.” He winked at Springer, and then he was gone, hustling down to the end of the table.

Springer gaped after him.

Top Spin laughed. “Right, so. That’s a thing.” He grinned at them and popped another bite of biscuit

into his mouth. "Sandstorm really likes swords."

Down the table, one of the Iaconians snorted a laugh so hard he almost choked on his drink. Megatron raised his eyebrows at the dark crimson bara, tall and gangly, not unlike Whirl.

"Am I missing something?" he asked.

Springer looked as though he wanted to strangle his soldiers.

Top Spin shook his head. "Private joke," he said with a wink. "Pyro's got a twisted sense of humor."

"What about twins?" Another of the harpies asked, leaning forward. He'd been sitting on Sandstorm's other side, but now he slid into Sandstorm's abandoned seat, right next to Top Spin.

Megatron frowned. "What about them?" he asked as Soundwave replied, "Accepted without restriction."

"It's different from home, Twin Twist," Rodimus added with a small smile. "There aren't any strict laws here. Though there are also only two sets of twins, so maybe it hasn't come up yet." He looked up at Megatron. "Top Spin and Twin Twist are twins."

Bara twins, hm? The rarest of the rare.

Megatron knew all too well what became of twins in Crystal City. They were, more often than not, separated for their own good. It was believed twins had the inclination to mate each other; therefore, it was best to keep them apart, though that didn't bode well for them. Twins tended to wither away, for lack of a better term, without their counterpart.

No one was sure why yet.

Though it seemed Twin Twist and Top Spin seemed to be doing all right. Megatron was curious, however, if their carrier had survived his carry. It was not a decent topic for dinner conversation, but Megatron was aware there was a reason bara twins were so uncommon. Their carry usually resulted in the death of the carrier. A single bara egg was already large. Two of them made a strain on the carrier's body and harpies simply didn't have the medical facilities the humans did to safely bring those carries to term.

Megatron had heard stories of how twins were received in other flocks. Many of them, he knew, opted to euthanize the twin they considered the weaker of the two. Some flocks would abandon twins as they were considered an ill portent. It was probably what had happened to Laserbeak and Buzzsaw, they'd decided. The twins had been sold by their parents to be rid of their curse.

"We're not mated," Top Spin said with a strained smile, like he'd been forced to disclose this numerous times before.

"And we don't want to be," Twin Twist added with a scowl.

Now that Megatron was paying attention, he could see the similarities between them. They were echoes of each other. Where Top Spin was mostly white with bits of grey and dark blues, Twin Twist was mostly a pale grey with bits of white and dark blues. They both had two thick stripes over their wings as well.

“We don’t judge here in Kaon,” Megatron said, knowing he had to choose his words carefully. “Not between consenting adults at any rate. If you are seeking a home--”

“They’re not,” Springer growled, his eyes flashing with anger. “They’re part of my phalanx, my crew, and they don’t need any other home.”

Top Spin patted Springer on the shoulder. “Calm down, boss. We’re not thinking of jumping flocks. Was just a curiosity is all.” He grinned, easygoing, his gaze slanting to Megatron. “Appreciate the offer though. It’s always nice to have a backup plan.”

“Right,” Springer said, and his eyes narrowed. He forked a piece of pastry into his mouth before his gaze seemed to focus on Starscream. He pointed at the smol with his fork. “What about you?” he asked around his mouthful. “What flock are you from?”

Starscream arched an eyebrow.

Megatron had to hide his smirk. If Springer thought he’d found a weak link in Starscream, he was sorely mistaken.

“Vos,” Starscream drawled and folded his fingers together, resting his chin upon them. “I fled an arranged mating and found shelter here.” His smile broadened. “I suppose you’re going to tell me that was all a big mistake, and I was better off where I left.”

Springer wiped at his mouth. “I wouldn’t presume to do that. Though I do find it curious.” He tilted his head, crest flicking. “Vos is far from here. How’d you manage the journey?”

“By the skin of my teeth.” Starscream bared them pointedly. “Or maybe a smol who is capable of taking care of himself is anathema to you. I gather you like them meek and pliant. Easier to pin down that way, I imagine.”

Megatron snorted behind a cup of mead. Rodimus had no such compunction and started giggling madly.

For the second time that evening, Springer outright gaped. He spluttered, feathers flaring, face darkening into a terrible hue.

“My preferences are no concern of yours,” he growled, and his grip on his cup tightened, to the point the carved wood creaked a protest. “Unless, of course, it’s because you’ve been seeking someone of a firmer hand yourself. Seems like you could use it.”

“Oh, that is certainly not the case.” Starscream leaned back languidly, examining his talons as though bored. “I’ve tamed fiercer creatures than yourself.” He paused and tilted his head. “Then again, there are blackberry bushes out there with more bite.”

Springer exhaled sharply through his nose. His lips pressed into a thin line, and a low growl rolled through his chest.

“Speaking of creatures,” Top Spin interjected loudly, all but shoving an apple at his leader’s chest, “I seem to recall you mentioning something about raptors earlier?”

“Yes, we have one pack who is always welcome in Kaon. While they are nomadic, I do believe

Kaon is claimed as their territory,” Megatron answered.

“Claimed?” Springer echoed with a snort. He seemed to have regained some of his bluster. “They’re beasts. Barely qualifying as intelligent. How can they claim anything?”

Megatron’s eyes narrowed.

“That is remarkably ignorant of you to say,” Starscream said in a cold tone. “If a voltaic cat can claim territory, why can’t a Raptor? Though that is a false equivalence since Raptors are both sapient and vastly more intelligent than a voltaic cat. Though I can’t say the same for you.”

“Grimlock and his pack are friends to the Kaon Aerie,” Rodimus added sharply. “If he were here, Grimlock would be recognized as a leader and you’d have to grant him the same respect you do Liege Megatron, per the Tyrest Accords. Remember that, Captain Springer.”

Springer, at least, had the decency to look chastened. “Yes, of course, my prince. How short-sighted of me. Only, you know as well as I do, that we’ve had nothing but trouble from the Raptors near Iacon.”

“Perhaps that’s because you treat them as lesser beings rather than equals. That would make anyone upset,” Megatron suggested with a casual lift of his shoulders.

“In all fairness, we have tried to sit down and have a civil conversation with them, but it has failed. Repeatedly,” Top Spin said with a little sigh.

“Raptors can detect condescension and disdain far better than you think they can. They may sound ignorant, as they speak another language, but they are most assuredly not,” Starscream said. “Had you ever been to Vos, you might have had occasion to meet Deathsaurus and his Pack of Wonders, a traveling entertainment troupe. You could learn much from them.”

Rodimus chuckled and gave Starscream a pointed look. “Oh, yes,” he said. “You can learn a lot of things. Including how skillfully they craft their nests.”

Starscream hissed at him, baring his teeth, but it seemed a playful warning more than an angry one. “You hush,” he said.

Springer’s eyes widened. “You’ve had... liaisons with one of the creatures?”

“Stop calling them creatures,” Starscream snapped. “The only difference between us is an evolutionary path. They are no less sapient than you and I, and yes, I have. Deathsaurus was the only bara I’d ever met in Vos who had an inkling of kindness for their lovers.”

Twin Twist frowned. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but don’t the Vosians have laws against their smols taking any bara other than their mate?”

Starscream sat back, his eyes narrowing to slits of ember. “Laws mean nothing to those who don’t wish to follow them. Why else do you think I left?”

“It’s beside the point,” Springer said and pointed at Starscream with his fork again. He seemed to enjoy gesturing with the tableware. “Deathsaurus and his ilk might be of the cultured variety, but Predaking and his pack have been raiding our stores, harassing the smaller villages, and being a general nuisance from the moment of Iacon’s inception.”

Starscream snorted. “So in other words, they were there first, and objected to you ousting them, so they’ve done the best they could with the resources available. Typical.”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Top Spin said, obviously trying to calm the tension of the situation. “But you aren’t wrong either. Perhaps we could take a closer look at how we are communicating and find a better, more effective solution.”

“And that’s why Springer would be lost without you, Spin,” Rodimus said with a soft chuckle. “You’re the cold to his fire.”

Top Spin laughed and popped a grape into his mouth. “Well, when it comes to being a captain, you need some of that fire.”

“I am sitting right here,” Springer gritted out.

“Yes, yes, I see you, captain.” Top Spin’s free hand patted Springer on the shoulder before he scooped a pastry puff from the table. “Here, have one of these. They’re absolutely delicious. My compliments to the baker, by the way. You truly have some talented flockmembers, Liege Megatron.”

Springer pressed his lips together and snatched the puff out of Top Spin’s hand. His feathers ruffled, but he must have had some self-control beneath the bluster, because he didn’t say anything further. The way he shoved the puff in his mouth was just shy of ridiculous.

Perhaps a tad hilarious.

“Thank you.” Megatron tipped his head in appreciation. “You know, I was never lucky enough to visit Iacon. By the time Orion was old enough to be sent as a delegation, we’d already left. Why don’t you share with us some of the wonders of your city? The... unique things which make it beautiful.”

“Oh, I could talk all night,” Top Spin said. “I think we all could. We love our aerie.”

“Then please do.” Starscream leaned forward, all trace of his earlier animosity gone. “I’ve spoken at lengths with Rodimus, but he’s not a very good storyteller. And he wasn’t as observant as he should have been.”

Rodimus held up his hands. “Guilty as charged. Sorry, but I was a prince. I didn’t get to see the city much.”

“We’ll be happy to fill in the gaps then,” Springer said and he gave Rodimus a sharp look. “Since someone had the tendency to slip away from his lessons before they could begin.”

“Hey!” Rodimus’ crest feathers twitched, his face darkening with an embarrassed hue. “This is not make fun of Rodimus night.”

Starscream laughed. “Oh, I don’t know,” he drawled. “Seems like since you’re the cause of all the trouble, there’s nothing wrong with poking fun.”

Springer peered at him. “I think I could like you, Vosian.”

“Starscream,” Starscream purred, correcting him. “And too bad, I’m taken.”

Rodimus snorted. “Right. Sure you are.” He snatched at his mead and took a great gulp. “Spin, why don’t you tell Starscream about where you were hatched? I think he’d like that.”

“The where or the how?” Top Spin said with a raised brow. He nudged his twin with an elbow. “That story never gets old, eh?”

“Only to some,” Twin Twist sighed.

“Spoilsport.” Top Spin rolled his eyes and wriggled in his seat. “Well,” he began. “It was a dark and stormy night.”

“It was mid-afternoon,” Twin Twist corrected around the rim of his mug.

“Hush, you don’t even like telling the story.”

“Then you should tell it right.”

Megatron chuckled despite himself as the twins bickered. It seemed, at last, that the tension around the table was vanishing. Down the row, Sandstorm was deep in conversation with Roadbuster and Drift. Ironfist had engaged Brainstorm while Pyro and Pipes were giggling together, Pipes inching ever closer to Pyro on the bench. That was a match which wasn’t going to bear any fruit. Poor Pipes. Ever hopeful that one.

Megatron rested a hand on Rodimus’ back and leaned in close to his mate. “I’m going to check on the Aerie, make sure everything is safe and secure. Will you keep an eye on things here?”

Rodimus turned to face him, eyes wide and startled. “You trust me to do that?”

“If you’re going to be my mate, I’ll leave a lot more in your capable hands,” Megatron nuzzled him, struggling to keep it chaste. “Though if you can make an excuse to leave and seek me out, I wouldn’t be opposed either.”

“Oh, the things you say,” Rodimus breathed, turning his head as if in an attempt to capture Megatron’s lips.

Megatron stood before he let temptation sway him. He brushed his lips over Rodimus’ temple in parting, his hand slid away from Rodimus’ back.

Unfortunately, the opportunity to sneak out quietly was gone in an instant. He’d stood and managed to attract everyone’s attention.

Damn.

Megatron forced a cordial smile. “If you’ll excuse me, it’s been a busy day and I have much to oversee before the night is through. Feel free to eat as much as you like.”

He slipped out from behind the bench and eased to the door, taking careful note of the way Springer’s feathers flicked with aggravation. “Any of the public areas are open to you. Please ask permission before entering any personal nests, however. Otherwise, make yourself at home.”

He smiled again, the sort of smile he'd been taught as Orion's personal guard, a smile for a soldier who was to be seen and not heard, polite and well-mannered, decoration that could spring to action at a moment's notice. Megatron hadn't been taught the complete round of royal behavior, but he'd learned enough. It served him well now.

Springer glared, but managed through clenched teeth, "We appreciate your hospitality and thank you for your generosity."

He'd had similar training to Megatron. They were far too much alike. Thank Adaptus Orion was sequestered in his nest. He'd be endlessly amused by this and tease Megatron for years.

"You're welcome." Megatron smiled, all politics and courtesy, and stepped away from the table. "If you have any questions, I am sure my Speaker or Rodimus can answer them for you."

If he was lucky, Rodimus would find some way to escape. Megatron had not had occasion to embrace his consort in hours, and now that he'd opened the lid, he had no wish to close it again.

Though he wondered if Springer would try and delay or stop Rodimus, since he had to know what Rodimus' intentions for this evening were.

Megatron headed for the upper canopy. He figured he'd wait for Rodimus up there, rather than lurk outside the dining hall, struggling to resist the urge to peek inside and see what was keeping Rodimus. With his luck, Springer would do something stupid and Megatron would reply in kind, and then they'd have an incident on their hands.

Best to keep temptation at bay.

He made it not a handful of steps before he heard someone calling his name. Megatron spun in a low circle, seeking out the origin of it, when he heard it again. He followed the voice to the edge of the path, and as he approached to investigate, a head appeared, flush with rust-orange feathers.

"There you are," Rung greeted warmly before he nimbly dropped down to the same level as Megatron, adjusting his glasses as he landed. "I've been hoping to catch you."

Megatron tucked his hands behind his back. "I apologize for being unavailable. It's been a very busy day."

"Oh, I know." Rung chuckled, offering Megatron a big, bright smile as he looked up. "There's no need to apologize. Though I'm glad to have caught you now."

"Is there something I can help you with?" Megatron asked, with a note of concern. Rung didn't look troubled, but then, he could be so very easygoing. Truly one of the least troublesome members of Megatron's flock.

Rung bobbed on his heels. "There's nothing wrong. I merely wanted to congratulate you." He removed his glasses and peered up at Megatron. "I see that you and Hot Rod – pardon me, Rodimus – have finally come to terms."

A large smile bloomed on Megatron's lips. "Yes, we have," he replied, warmth tightening into a huge ball inside of him at just the thought of his Intended. Was this what true joy felt like?

"I am glad." Rung's look turned fond as he glanced past Megatron, toward the dining hall. "The both

of you deserve this happiness.”

Megatron hadn't realized Rung was paying attention. In fact, he was one of the few who had not seen fit to nag Megatron regarding his love life. Megatron cocked his head.

“You were the only one who never encouraged me to go after him,” Megatron said, his forehead crinkling in recollection. “You didn't dissuade me either. You didn't offer a single grain of advice.” Of all his flock, Megatron would have expected it of Rung the most, so it was a very curious thing.

Rung smiled at him, gentle as always. “No, I didn't.”

“Why?”

Rung patted him on the arm, a featherlight touch. “Because it was something you needed to discover for yourself.”

Megatron tilted his head. “All realizations are done alone.”

“True.” Rung's smile broadened with an air of mischief. “But also, you are very stubborn, my liege. You are more the type to cling harder to what you've decided is a truth, the more you are pushed to see otherwise. I knew this was not something you could be persuaded into seeing. You'd come around in time.”

“And if I hadn't?” Megatron challenged.

Rung's eyes glistened with humor. “I had faith you would. We don't follow you without reason.” He patted Megatron on the arm before tucking his hands behind his back. “I suppose I'd better join Maximus now, else he'll get to looking for me.” He sighed, but it was with the warmth of affection. “He's hopeless without me.”

“It is often that way, when it comes to love,” Megatron said.

“Indeed.” Rung smiled, soft and certain.

He left. Megatron watched him go, something warm and settled in his core. It wasn't so much he needed Rung's approval to feel content, but that with every one of his flock who was overjoyed for him, Megatron was even more certain he'd made the right choice. He felt as though he was finally coming into his own.

Megatron continued on, climbing ever upward, through an aerie mostly quiet as his flock was, by and large, in the dining hall. Save for those on guard duty, but they would be spelled by others throughout the evening.

He climbed to the perch he and Hot Rod had shared only weeks prior. Nostalgia tugged at his core, and Megatron wrapped his talons around the thick branch as he waited. It was still bright outside, the sun a few hours away from setting this time of the year. A light breeze rustling the leaves, making them dance and sway. The sky was clear, the blue darkening on the horizon.

A perfect evening for a flight.

The only thing to make it better would be Rodimus' company.

Speaking of which...

Megatron grinned as the branches below shook. A muttered curse floated up.

Megatron peered through the leaves and found Rodimus climbing upward, his face pinched with irritation. Whether because the climb had been difficult, or his guardian had been, Megatron didn't know.

He crouched and offered a hand to his intended. "Having trouble are we?"

Rodimus rolled his eyes, but accepted the offer. "Blame Springer. He started going on about my chastity and my virtue and whether or not I wanted to offer both here in Kaon." He grunted as Megatron pulled him up.

Rodimus immediately plastered himself against Megatron's front with a giggle. "The look on his face when I told him I no longer had either is something I'm going to treasure forever."

Megatron groaned. "He's going to challenge me to an honor duel before he leaves." He swept his arms around Rodimus, briefly cupping the pretty smol's rump.

"I won't let him. Besides, it's up to me who I go to nest with, not my guardian." Rodimus snuggled against his chest, purring audibly. "So. Flight?"

Megatron's tongue swept over his lips. "Maybe a brief one."

"You just want to get me in your nest." Rodimus wriggled against him, his hands sweeping down Megatron's sides. "Not that I'm opposed. We could always skip the flight." He wagged his eyebrows.

Megatron cupped the back of Rodimus' head and leaned down, brushing his lips over Rodimus'. "We could. But something tells me if we don't burn off some of this energy, our night will be over too quickly."

"Mmm. You may be right." Rodimus pressed against him, his body moving in a sinuous wave. "Three times around the aerie then?"

"Three times?" Megatron lifted Rodimus from his lap and set him aside. He stood, stretching his arms above him. "You think you'll make it that long?"

"Pfft. I can hold out longer than you!" Rodimus declared, indignant, as he struggled to pull himself to his feet.

"Prove it." Megatron winked. "I'll race you."

He leapt without waiting for a reply, taking to the air with a fierce pull of his arms, the wind rushing over his face and feathers.

"No fair!" Rodimus called after him before the wind caught his voice.

Megatron grinned as the branches noisily shook and Rodimus leapt into the air after him, wings furiously beating to give chase. It was strange how playful he felt, how light and carefree. As if he'd finally shed the burdens weighing so heavily on his shoulders.

Rodimus caught up to him quickly enough. Smols had the advantage when it came to speed. He flew circles around Megatron, laughing as he spun and twisted and danced in the sky. Megatron allowed himself to admire this time especially as the sunset played across Rodimus' feathers.

Mine, he thought. Mine if he'll have me.

Three circles around the Aerie was indeed all they managed. Need rushed and roared through Megatron, and it took all the focus he had to stay in the air. Rodimus sped ahead of him, beating Megatron to a landing on the aerie canopy, coming down with such force he rattled several branches loose. They rained down, to be caught by the netting later.

Rodimus looked up at Megatron and wriggled his fingers with a grin. His tongue ran over his lips as he winked. And then he vanished, dropping out of sight.

Oh. So that was the game he wanted to play then.

Megatron's core throbbed a faster beat. He landed roughly, the perch creaking beneath his mass. He crouched, peering through the canopy, but he could see not see so much as a flash of orange or crimson. Rodimus had already gone. Back to Megatron's nest, no doubt, unless he truly wanted to give Megatron a challenge.

Well then.

Megatron grinned, his tail swishing behind him, desire turning to a tide of lust pulsing heat through his veins.

Let the chase begin.

Chapter 15

Megatron spotted Rodimus' red-orange tail disappearing around the corner of the upper atrium, the mostly empty walkways up here home to residential nests, some unclaimed, some occupied.

If it bothered anyone to see their leader racing through the corridors in hot pursuit of his intended, no one spoke up. A few comments trailed in Megatron's wake – both lewd and encouraging alike – but no one complained. Or perhaps they were saving it for later.

Megatron would worry about such things in the morning. Right now, there was a pretty smol teasing him, always darting ahead, just out of reach, his feathers swishing through the leaves.

Rodimus was more agile than Megatron knew. He grabbed extended branches and growths, clinging to them, leaping from them, always a step ahead. He laughed, bright and carefree, and Megatron's core throbbed even harder.

He could no more stop himself from chasing Rodimus, than he could stop the heat pulsing through his veins, or the thick throb of need in his groin. Everytime Rodimus jumped, his feathermane flattened, and Megatron's marks stood out in sharp relief. His twitching tail was a temptation Megatron couldn't ignore.

He chased, and he stalked, and he waited for his moment.

It came when Rodimus tossed him a cheeky wink and leapt from one branch to another, a larger gap than he'd dared so far.

Megatron pounced, snatching Rodimus out of thin air, a startled squeak spilling out of Rodimus' mouth as they hit the ground, Megatron rolling to cushion the impact.

"Got you," he growled as they slid to a stop, rucked up against the wall of the corridor. He pinned Rodimus beneath him, the lithe body rolling up to meet his.

Rodimus looked up at him, breathless, eyes wide and bright. "I guess you did," he breathed and squirmed. "Now what?"

Megatron groaned, laying more of his weight against the smol, keeping Rodimus trapped. His arms tightened around Rodimus as his clava throbbed, almost daring to peep from its sheath.

"You are threatening my composure," Megatron admitted.

Rodimus laughed and surged upward, licking the tip of Megatron's nose. "Good," he purred and wriggled, his groin rolling up against Megatron's belly. "But I ask again, my liege. What now?"

Wasn't it obvious?

Megatron rolled to his feet in one smooth motion and slung Rodimus over his shoulder, pinning him there with a firm hand on Rodimus' rump. Rodimus squawked his surprise, tail sweeping through the air and nearly smacking Megatron in the face.

"Now we go somewhere I can deal with you without my flock watching," Megatron said, his face

flushed with heat.

They had an audience. Oh, it was maybe only a half-dozen of his flock members, and they all looked approving, but that wasn't the point. Megatron was Liege. He had to have some semblance of decorum.

"Back to your nest, I hope," Rodimus said in a gleeful tone, wriggling his rump pointedly.

Megatron gave it a light smack, and Rodimus giggled. Megatron sighed. There would be no punishing this one apparently.

Megatron leapt down a level as Rodimus clutched his back and made a sound of delight. Shows of strength were, apparently, a point of arousal for him, if Megatron had to guess by the clava poking at his shoulder.

His grip on Rodimus' rump tightened.

He might have run to his nest, the throb in his groin threatening to bare his own clava to all and sundry. Megatron wasn't a prude, but the idea of walking around his aerie with his clava on display was not ideal.

He almost tore the curtain down from his doorway and fumbled to loosen the knot so it would muffle noises and announce he was too busy to speak with anyone. Rodimus made rocking motions with his hips, grinding his arousal on Megatron's shoulder.

"Put me down," he begged. "Please, Megatron. Put me down. You got me. I'm here. And believe me, I'm not going anywhere."

Megatron stalked toward his nestbed with single-minded focus. Oh, he would put Rodimus down, but right where he wanted him. Right where Rodimus couldn't squirm away, where Megatron could enjoy every inch of the smol he could lay his lips on. He wanted Rodimus beneath him again, to hear him moan and beg and watch him writhe.

Megatron's knees wobbled. He almost fell into his nest, but caught himself at the last minute. He waded into the sea of blankets and pillows, kicking aside some those stained from last night. A problem to worry about later.

Megatron slung Rodimus down into the pillows. The smol landed on his back, arms and legs splayed, his feathers fanning out around him. His face was flushed pink, his lips parted invitingly, his eyes wide and bright with arousal.

By Adaptus, he was hard. His clava jutted from his sheath, already dribbling at the tip. Megatron's mouth watered.

Rodimus was wet, too. His featherdown was dark with slick, and arousal had the folds of his antrum swollen and visible. Megatron's clava throbbed, seeping at the sight of it, and he wanted nothing more than to sink back into that welcoming heat. He wouldn't make the same mistake as yesterday however.

No longer untouched Rodimus might be, but he still wasn't in a shape for Megatron to fall over him like a crazed beast. No matter how loud Megatron's instincts roared.

Rodimus' flush deepened. He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth. "You're just staring at me."

"Because you're gorgeous." Megatron dropped to his knees between Rodimus' thighs, crawling over the smol until Rodimus was caged beneath him. "Utterly delectable. A delicious treat. I was deciding how I should consume you."

His hands slid up Rodimus' arms, slow and gentle, before his fingers curled around Rodimus' wrists. Not so tight as to hurt, but enough that a testing tug proved fruitless. Rodimus was well and truly caught.

A whimper rose in his throat. He licked his lips, body rolling up against Megatron's, the head of his clava rutting over Megatron's belly.

"The things you say," Rodimus tipped his head back, revealing the long line of his throat, the raw and fresh evidence of Megatron's marks.

Complete and utter submission.

Arousal roared through Megatron like wildfire. He growled, the echoes of it vibrating through his chest, and he stole Rodimus' lips for his own. The kiss was less gentle than he intended, but need yawed through him, and more of his weight rested on Rodimus. He moaned into the kiss as the head of his clava rutted over Rodimus' feathers, the silky-softness of them stirring his arousal more.

Rodimus whined, his thighs bracketing Megatron's hips, knees pressing in, urging him onward. He wriggled beneath Megatron, grinding against his belly.

"More," Rodimus gasped as Megatron broke free of his lips, leaving stinging nips over Rodimus' jaw.

"Wait." Megatron nudged under Rodimus' chin, burying his face against Rodimus' throat, where the sweetest of scents lingered. Where he could feel the pulse of Rodimus' core against his lips.

Megatron groaned and rolled his hips, grinding his clava against Rodimus, slick staining Rodimus' feathers. He shifted, just so, and then their clavas collided, hard heat against hard heat.

Rodimus sucked air through his teeth. He gasped, head tilting far back, his throat surrendered to Megatron's lips.

Need thundered in Megatron's ears. His grip on Rodimus' wrists tightened by degrees, bearing Rodimus down into the nest. He ground down, hips rocking and rolling, thrusting against Rodimus in mimicry of claiming him.

Rodimus keened. "Take me!" he pleaded, and the sweet smell of his slick grew even stronger. Megatron could feel it, damp on his feathers, but no.

He would wait. He would taste Rodimus' pleasure before he took what had been offered. He had self-control. This time, he'd prove it.

He still growled against Rodimus' throat, let him feel the vibrations of it through his skin. He found an unmarked patch and sank his teeth against it, tasting Rodimus with flicks of his tongue. He exhibited some restraint, however, and continued to avoid the traditional mating spot, and refrained from biting deep enough to scar.

Rodimus gasped, his back arching. His hips juttered against Megatron's, a rapid and uneven thrust of his clava. Their lengths slid together, jostling for space, slick mingling.

Megatron licked and nibbled, found yet another bare patch that could use his mark. He tasted Rodimus, as he felt every gasp, every moan. His world was nothing but Rodimus' sweetness, the tickle of Rodimus' panting exhalations against his crest, the urgent noises vibrating in Rodimus' throat, against his lips.

The deepest of bites was over the very center of Rodimus' throat, the hardest place for him to hide. It was a shade too far to the left to be a mating mark. It called to Megatron's mouth, made him hot and hungry.

He licked his way to it, and then lapped over the marks with a long, wet swipe of his tongue. Rodimus warbled beneath him, spine arching into a parabolic curve, head thrown back. Warmth splattered between their bodies as Rodimus shook and babbled something in a language Megatron didn't recognize.

Hot slick rubbed over Megatron's clava. He swore it tingled, and it made Rodimus' feathers even more sleek. Megatron thrust against him, need boiling in his veins. He stole Rodimus' lips again, Rodimus panting against his mouth, his thighs quivering around Megatron's hips.

It took only a handful more thrusts for Megatron to follow Rodimus over the edge. He pressed his forehead to Rodimus' and groaned as he came, spurt after spurt striping Rodimus' feathers and mingling with Rodimus' own spill. Megatron shifted his weight so he wasn't crushing Rodimus and sucked in several gulps of air.

His entire body trembled, and he was still hard as a rock. One release wasn't nearly enough to clear his arousal, and given the way Rodimus wriggled beneath him, Rodimus was in the same situation.

"That better not be it," Rodimus panted as he tugged his wrists free of Megatron's loosened grip. He slid his hands up Megatron's chest and over his shoulders. "I still want you inside me."

"I'll get there." Megatron licked over the bites on Rodimus' neck, wincing to himself. Many were deeper than he intended. Two of them were bleeding. By Adaptus, what was wrong with him.

Rodimus sighed and stroked his tarsals over the back of Megatron's legs. "Get there faster," he grumbled.

Megatron chuckled. He pushed off Rodimus and sat back on his heels, admiring the splay of the smol beneath him. Spill indeed decorated Rodimus' abdomen in glistening streaks. He remained half-hard, his clava damp with moisture, but the slick gathered in his antrum told of his hunger.

Megatron dragged his knuckles down Rodimus' groin and palmed the pretty smol's antrum, slick immediately sticking to him. "You're so wet," he said, his voice coming out more like a growl.

His clava throbbed as though he hadn't just found release. The urge to take Rodimus rose up inside of him again, like a tingle in his spine.

Rodimus rolled his hips, riding Megatron's palm. "And you're being a tease." He pouted, lips puffy from Megatron's kisses. His antrum swelled, clit-nub peeking from the crown of his folds.

Megatron dampened his thumb with Rodimus' slick and pressed it to that swollen button, circling it lightly. Rodimus inhaled, his hips rolling against Megatron's hand, his antrum radiating heat.

"You're not sore?" Megatron asked, in all seriousness. His own pleasure would wait. He wouldn't hurt Rodimus again, not if he could help it.

Rodimus clawed at the nest covers, grinding harder against Megatron's hand. "No, I'm not. I swear." He licked his lips, eyes slitted as they met Megatron's. "Isn't it too soon in our relationship for you to make me beg?"

Megatron's eyebrows lifted. He cupped his hands under Rodimus' rump. "Who gave you such kinky ideas?"

"That's my secret to tell," Rodimus sang with a salacious little grin. His hands landed over Megatron's, talons digging into the back of Megatron's hands. "Maybe you can interrogate me with your clava." He wagged his eyebrows.

Megatron laughed. He sat back on his heels and tugged Rodimus into his lap, the smol flopping against him and bearing him backward. His spine hit the rounded edge of his nest, propping him mostly upright. Rodimus plastered against his front, cradled in the crook of Megatron's hips.

"Mmm, this is much better." Rodimus wriggled, planting his antrum right against the rigid heat of Megatron's clava. "Guess that means sometimes I'm going to have to take what I want."

"Fortunately, I don't see a problem with that." Megatron shifted his legs out from under him, drawing up his knees to support Rodimus from behind, the brightly colored tail flicking aside at the last minute.

He cupped Rodimus' face, drawing the smol toward him for a kiss. He brushed their lips together, lightly at first, before tracing Rodimus' lips with the tip of his tongue. Rodimus shivered and rocked down, his slick painting hot and wet over Megatron's clava.

"If this is romance, I want more of it," Rodimus murmured. His eyes fluttered shut as he tilted his face up toward Megatron.

"You can have whatever you want, if you'll stay with me," Megatron replied.

He pressed little kisses over Rodimus' face, on his forehead, his temples, the jut of his cheekbones. He decorated the tip of Rodimus' nose and exhaled hotly into his ears. He licked a long, hot stripe up the midline of Rodimus' throat before ending at his lips, kissing him deeply.

Rodimus tasted sweet, and he moaned into the kiss, his hands clutching at Megatron's sides. He slipped down a bit further in Megatron's lap, his antrum cradling Megatron's clava with heated invitation.

One Megatron intended to accept.

Megatron cradled Rodimus' hips and lifted him. He angled himself and eased into Rodimus in one slow, savoring thrust. Megatron moaned, trembling, as he was embraced by rippling heat. Rodimus gasped and arched on top of him, rolling his hips to make Megatron move faster.

Rodimus slung his arms around Megatron's neck, his knees digging into the nest covers. "More," he

moaned as he lifted and lowered himself, working Megatron deeper, his slick pooling between their bodies.

The scent of him was dizzying. Megatron's mouth found the crook of neck and shoulder, and then wandered on. He nibbled Rodimus' collarbone, buried in the tickly, soft feathers of his mane. He inhaled, greedily taking in the berry-sweet scent of Rodimus. His clava throbbed, grinding deeper, Rodimus rippling around him.

He let Rodimus set the pace, and then wondered if he should have, because Rodimus started working his hips, slamming himself faster and faster on Megatron's clava. He made all these sounds in his throat, little whimpers and gasps, his talons kneading the back of Megatron's shoulders.

It took all Megatron had not to throw him down into the nest and rut upon him like he were caught in the grips of a mating heat. His clava throbbed, an off beat to the rhythm of Rodimus' movements.

He was gorgeous like this, caught up in pleasure, going after it with determination, his lower lip caught between his teeth. His eyes were scrunched shut, his face flushed a deeper pink. His crest feathers flared, and the sounds he made rung in Megatron's ears like little seductive croons.

"By Adaptus, you're beautiful," Megatron breathed, because it was truth, and one Rodimus deserved to hear.

He tugged on Rodimus' ear with his teeth, nuzzling the smol and holding him closer. He cradled Rodimus' hips, helping him lift and sink onto Megatron's clava, faster and faster, grinding delightfully deep.

"Take me," Rodimus babbled as his talons dug in, little pricks in Megatron's skin, enough to leave marks behind. "Keep me. Oh, please, please." His head tipped back, spine arching.

He was hot like fire, a blaze to match his feathers. It exuded from him in waves, and the sweet scent of him left Megatron's head spinning. Or maybe it was the plea in Rodimus' voice, the way he clung to Megatron like he thought Megatron might leave him any moment.

Megatron's core throbbed. He pulled Rodimus hard against him, holding the smol tight against his body, grinding deeper into Rodimus, as if trying to mark him on the inside.

"You're mine," Megatron said against Rodimus' throat before he dragged his mouth upward and claimed Rodimus' lips, leaving little room for confusion.

Mine, mine, *mine*.

The word echoed in his head; it clawed out of his throat on a growl. It vibrated against Rodimus' throat where Megatron's lips found the marks he'd made.

Frag Springer. Frag Iacon. Frag anyone who thought otherwise. Rodimus was his, no matter what it took. No one was taking Rodimus from him.

No one.

Release took him with that thought, perhaps inappropriate, perhaps not. Megatron uttered something guttural against Rodimus' throat, clutching the smol close as he spilled deep. Pleasure eclipsed all else, leaving him with sensation – hot and wet, tight and clenching, so very sweet and warm.

Talons scraped at his shoulders. Gasps echoed in his ears, puffed over his crest. He heard keening, felt the clutch and tremble of a body against his. Rodimus writhed in his arms, thighs tight against Megatron, and then his antrum rippled. It clutched at Megatron's clava, milking him for every drop, as Rodimus came as well.

Megatron kissed Rodimus, gentle this time, soft and savoring. They were both panting, both shaking. Rodimus' desperate clutch eased, his talons retracting from Megatron's back. He hummed a moan into the kiss, lolling weakly against Megatron.

He was still half-hard, but the need didn't pound through his veins. It simmered quietly, content to wait or react, depending on his partner. Rodimus made a sleepy purr in his throat and nuzzled Megatron.

"Yours," he said, breath puffing over Megatron's lips.

Megatron swallowed thickly. He must have spoken aloud, not that he remembered doing so in the mad rush to ecstasy.

He stroked his hands up and down Rodimus' sides. "You may yet change your mind, once you see who I am and not the persona you've built for me."

Rodimus snorted. "I know who you are." He nipped at Megatron's ear. "But if it makes you feel better to try a little patience, I will." He twitched his hips, teasing Megatron's clava within him. "So long as I still get to enjoy this part, too."

Sassy minx.

Megatron wrapped his arms around Rodimus and tilted, rolling them into the comfort of the nest, his clava slipping free in the process. He'd have to get up to douse the lightning lanterns, but it was early yet for sleep anyway. From here, he could make out the changing colors of the sky as the sun sank below the horizon.

Rodimus wriggled until he sprawled on top of Megatron, tucking his head under Megatron's chin, his body anchoring Megatron's in the nest.

"You can enjoy this part, as you so elegantly put it, whenever we both have the time to spare." Megatron stroked Rodimus' back, soaking in the scent and heat of him.

He couldn't remember a time he felt so content. He'd forgotten the simple intimacies. He'd spent so long pushing everyone away to make it easier on himself. He hadn't realized how much he missed this.

Rodimus chuckled. "Fair enough." He shifted until more of his body blanketed Megatron's, his tail forming a brightly colored fan over them. "Mm. Let's stay like this for a bit."

"You'll hear no argument from me." Megatron's gaze shifted to the balcony.

The sky itself was striated shades of pink and dark blue. It was lovely. Of course, not nearly as much as the smol in his arms, but perhaps Megatron was biased. He considered getting up to wipe them down, but not even the sticky mess on his groin and belly could convince him to get up right now. He was far too comfortable.

In the morning, Springer and his guard would leave, taking the tension of their presence with them. Megatron knew he wasn't the only one who would be relieved, though some of his unmated might be disappointed. Of course, should he and Rodimus truly mate, Megatron would have to journey to Iacon eventually.

It was the proper thing to do.

Though that reminded him.

"Rodimus?"

"Hm?"

"What was that with Starscream?"

Rodimus' tail twitched. "Huh?"

Megatron stroked down his back, ending at his rump, giving it a little pat. "At dinner?"

"Oh. That." Rodimus chuckled and looked up at Megatron, his lips curled in a bright grin. "You know he's been spending a lot of time at the university, right?"

"I'm aware."

Rodimus' glee could not have been more evident. His crest feathers wriggled. "Well, apparently, there's some human he likes there. Made himself a friend and everything."

For a moment, Megatron wasn't sure he heard his lover correctly. "...What?"

"They're just friends, but Starscream's head over heels." Rodimus laughed and tucked further into Megatron's neck. "It's not going to work out, but it's cute to see him so flustered over the guy. Especially since he's usually so distant."

Well, Megatron supposed Kaon accepted all kinds. Starscream might be the first to harbor feelings for a human, but there was a good chance he wouldn't be the last.

"I see." Megatron's hand lingered on Rodimus' rump, idly stroking the bright swaths of feathers. "You and Starscream are close now. When did that happen?"

"Oh, is that jealousy I detect?" Rodimus shifted until he could tuck his hands under his chin, propping himself up to better see Megatron's face.

"Merely curiosity." Megatron lifted his eyebrows, giving Rodimus a pointed look. "I remember when you were convinced I had my eyes on him."

Rodimus flushed and looked away, his crest flattening. "Yeah, well, I might have jumped to a few conclusions. What can I say? You were giving me mixed signals."

"And for that I apologize." Megatron nuzzled him and Rodimus shivered. "I will do my best to be forthright from now on."

“I appreciate that.” Rodimus sighed and sank against Megatron. “Mm. I’m hungry. I skipped eating my dinner for this, you know.”

“You could clean up and return to the dining hall.”

Rodimus huffed a laugh. “Or I could not clean up and we can see how quickly Springer turns into a volcano when I flounce in there covered in your marks and your spill.”

Megatron groaned and let his head fall back into the pillows. “You are going to be quite troublesome. I can see it already.”

“Mmm. All the trouble you need.” Rodimus nipped the bottom of Megatron’s chin before he rested his head on Megatron’s chest. “And a whole lot more, too.”

“Indeed.”

Megatron continued to pet Rodimus, enjoying the quiet intimacy of the moment. They’d get up soon enough, to clean, to nibble, perhaps to taste one another again. But for now, it could just be this.

And if he was lucky, he could have this forever.

~

Morning came, and Megatron woke slowly. Luxuriously almost. He had a warm body tucked up against his. Drooling into his throat, truth be told, and a fresh wind came in through the open balcony, carrying with it the scent of sweet bread. His nest was bright – too bright, he’d left the lightning lanterns aglow. If he strained his hearing, he could catch the sounds of his flock starting their daily routines.

Unlike yesterday, Soundwave was not standing over Megatron with bad news. In fact, Soundwave was nowhere to be seen.

He must have decided letting Megatron wake on his own was the wisest course of action. Given how much noise they must have been making last night, Megatron was not surprised.

Rodimus could be quite vocal in expressing his pleasure.

Megatron warmed thinking about it. Once the initial hesitation faded, Rodimus had been noisy indeed. He’d had no issues begging and pleading for more, and he surrendered to pleasure so beautifully. Megatron had not been able to resist him, and they’d rutted long into the night, until exhaustion took them both.

Even now, they were filthy, but Megatron couldn’t bring himself to care. His nest carried the scent of their coupling, and lost feathers littered the bedding. But Rodimus was snuggled up tight against him, quietly snoring, and Megatron couldn’t remember a time he felt so content. He wondered if he ever had.

Rodimus started to stir, squirming where he lay. “Mmm, is it morning already?” he asked, his tone sleepy, without opening his eyes.

Megatron chuckled and nuzzled the top of his head. “I think it’s been morning for several hours.”

“It’s not truly morning until I open my eyes.” Rodimus snickered. He buried his face against Megatron’s chest, his addition emerging muffled, “We can just stay in the nest today, right?”

“Wrong.” Megatron stroked Rodimus’ back, chuckling as Rodimus purred and arched into the petting. “The phalanx is leaving today, and as Liege, I must be present to see them off. It wouldn’t hurt for you to put in an appearance as well.”

Rodimus sighed. His left hand kneaded Megatron’s belly. “Your responsibilities keep getting in the way of my snuggle time.”

“They’re going to be your responsibilities soon enough.”

Rodimus groaned and wriggled around on top of Megatron. “I know, but does it have to be right away? Can’t I just enjoy the moment?”

Megatron laughed and curled his hands under Rodimus, bodily lifting the smol away from him, lest he be tempted to pin Rodimus into the pillows and have his way with him.

Again.

“Not, at least, this morning.” Megatron set Rodimus down on the edge of the nest, more or less free of the temptation of pillows and blankets. “And unfortunately, we don’t have time for a soak, so a quick wipedown it is.”

Rodimus’ bottom lip poked out in a pout. “I was looking forward to you spoiling me.”

Megatron’s hands smoothed down Rodimus’ thighs, teasing around his knees. “There will be time for that. I’m not going anywhere, Rodimus. There’s no need to rush.”

Pink tinted the skin around Rodimus’ nose. “I’m not rushing,” he grumbled and climbed to his feet with a huffy swish of his feathers. “It’s just that you have a habit of changing your mind, and I still don’t know what to expect from you.”

Rodimus turned away from him, heading straight for the washbasin. Megatron had only caught a glimpse of his expression, the anxiety written into it. He couldn’t blame Rodimus for feeling insecure. They’d spent many, many months dancing around one another, with Megatron’s behavior on a constant waffle.

Megatron climbed out of the nest, sparing the messiness of it only a second’s glance. He would tend to that later. Or he would return and miraculously find clean bedding and fluffed pillows. He never knew who Soundwave bribed and or convinced to keep Megatron’s nest spotless, and perhaps it was better he didn’t.

As Rodimus scrubbed at himself with jerky, almost self-punishing motions, Megatron perused his fruit basket and pulled out something he thought Rodimus would like. For himself, he grabbed an apple, and ate it in three large bites. He joined Rodimus, the smol staring hard at his abdomen as he wiped away the last evidence of their coupling.

“I’m sorry,” Megatron said, offering the ripe plum as a gesture of peace. “You’re right. I haven’t been very clear in the past, but that will be different from now on. You have my word.”

Rodimus sighed and dabbed the cloth in the basin. He turned toward Megatron and swiped at his

abdomen with quick, efficient strokes.

“You don’t have to apologize,” he said, eyes downcast and completely focused on his work. “This is just me being selfish. Surprise! I actually only think about myself a lot.”

He grinned, but it was half-hearted and crooked.

Megatron tucked a knuckle under Rodimus’ chin, tilting his face upward so Megatron could see his eyes. “Wanting private time with your lover is not selfish. If it were up to me, we truly would stay in this nest all afternoon.” He stroked the underside of Rodimus’ jaw. “I have craved your attention as well.”

Heat flushed Rodimus’ cheeks. “Oh.” His tail brushed the ground with a swish-swish. “Then I guess the sooner we see Springer and the rest off, the sooner we can come back?” His crest canted forward, betraying his eagerness.

Megatron leaned down and brushed his lips over Rodimus’. “That would be my assumption.”

“Oh, you big tease.” Rodimus sucked in a huge breath and stepped out of range. He offered the cloth with one hand, while he snatched the plum free with the other. “Clean up,” he said, waving the cloth pointedly. “We’re needed elsewhere.”

It was hard not to be amused, so Megatron didn’t bother to hide it. He accepted the cloth and set to wiping himself down while Rodimus gobbled up the plum and then went to pillage Megatron’s fruit basket. It was an oddly comfortable and domestic moment, and Megatron’s core pinged when he realized it was one he might enjoy again and again.

“Ready?” Rodimus asked after he’d devoured two handfuls of candied nuts, another plum, and a few slices of bread, all from Megatron’s basket.

Megatron gave himself – and Rodimus – one last glance before deeming them presentable. They couldn’t hide that they’d spent the last night rutting, not with all those marks on Rodimus’ throat, but it would have to do.

“Let’s go.”

Outside his nest, the hustle and bustle of his flock going about their business filled the air. There was no hubbub of noise from the central atrium, however. In fact, when Megatron approached the edge and looked down, there was no crowd surrounding Springer and his guards. Soundwave was present, the younger twins each occupying a shoulder, as he oversaw their preparations. A few other members of the Kaon flock lurked as well .

“I guess it is late,” Rodimus commented as he scrubbed the back of his head.

“They look like they are ready to leave,” Megatron said.

Bags sat at every guard’s feet. They were armored and weaponed up. One of them, Ironfist he thought, had the Iaconian flag in hand. Twin Twist hovered near the exit, bouncing on the heels of his feet, as though the most eager to depart.

Rodimus grinned. “Springer is probably worried that if they stay any longer, Pyro won’t leave.” He pointed to the edge of the cluster of Iaconian guards.

Sure enough, there Pyro was, and he was deep in conversation with Pipes, who had a bright grin and twitchy feathers. He leaned forward, interest clear across his face. They were very close for two harpies who were strangers. Megatron wondered if Pyro and Pipes had slept in separate beds last night.

Somehow, he doubted it.

“Well, he’s most welcome, should he decide to stay. I’ll bet Pipes wouldn’t mind.” Megatron’s gaze caught another familiar face, and swallowed down a sigh.

Judging by the massive hug Sandstorm was giving Drift, the Iaconian swordwielder had not spent the night alone either. Honestly. Did those two have no shame? Couldn’t they keep it in their featherdown for once?

Rodimus stood on the edge, his tail swishing back and forth behind him. He peered over his shoulder, eyebrows lifted. “Steal too many of his flock and my sire might protest.”

“Then maybe he should work harder to keep them.” Megatron snorted, and gestured to the atrium below. “Shall we?”

They stepped off the edge, leaping to the ground floor below. They landed unnoticed at first, with most of the Iaconian guard facing away from them.

Rodimus grabbed his hand, tangling their fingers together. “You and me,” he said as he snuggled against Megatron’s side, however briefly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good for you, boss.”

Megatron half-turned as Frenzy appeared behind him, strutting around until he faced them with a smug little smirk. His hands were tucked behind his back as he bobbed on his heels, looking like a cat with a bowl of cream.

“Actually surprised to see you out of your nest,” Frenzy added with a waggle of his eyebrows and a salacious wink.

Megatron sighed.

“*Some* of us understand the meaning of responsibility,” Rodimus retorted hotly.

Frenzy rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell me fragging the boss is gonna make you boring now, hot shot. Me and Rum were just startin’ to like you.”

Megatron pinched the bridge of his nose. “How are our visitors?” he asked, desperate to change the subject before Frenzy caused a scene. Or worse, Rodimus did.

“Supplied and ready to depart.”

Soundwave stepped up behind his adopted brother, placing a hand on Frenzy’s shoulder. Beneath the weight of it, Frenzy stiffened and had the grace to look guilty. “Waiting on Rodimus Minor first.”

“You can just call me Rodimus. No titles,” Rodimus said.

“Noted.” Soundwave dipped his head to acknowledge the request. His hand subtly tightened on Frenzy’s shoulder. “Frenzy.”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it, bro.” Frenzy twisted out from under Soundwave’s hand and spun on his tarsals.

He sketched a messy salute to Soundwave, despite knowing his brother couldn’t see it, and scampered off. To what task, Megatron did not know. He assumed if it was important enough, Soundwave would let him know later.

Soundwave wore a mask and couldn’t possibly pull off smug, and yet somehow, that was exactly what he did as he half-turned and gestured to the cluster of Iaconians. “Captain Springer waits.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Rodimus said with a sigh. He tugged on Megatron’s hand and strode forward, shoulders back with all the confidence a princeling should bear.

Springer was the first to notice them. Perhaps his Rodimus instincts had warned him, because he turned and spotted them before they could get a word of greeting out.

“Rodimus. His tone was surprisingly warm. His feathers fluttered around his face, his armor chiming as he moved. “Good morning.”

“And to you, captain.” Rodimus’ hand tightened around Megatron’s, as if trying to prove a point. “All ready for your journey?”

“The Kaonites have been very generous with their supplies.” Springer paused, his eyes flicking from Rodimus to Megatron and back again. Megatron, for his part, chose to stay silent. He’d let Rodimus handle this. “My prince, as you sure this is what you want?”

“Sure as the next beat of my core,” Rodimus declared.

Megatron’s core throbbed harder. He squeezed Rodimus’ hand back, a silent way of showing how he felt. The urge to take Rodimus in his arms grew again. Rodimus had yet to cease surprising him.

Springer sighed and scrubbed a hand down his face, the sigh of a guardian defeated by his charge’s sheer honesty. Megatron had been in that position once before, when Orion had pulled him aside and finally confessed everything about Shockwave, about Kaon, and about his desires to leave.

“Then I’ll pass the message along to Ultra Magnus.”

“Thanks, Springer.” Rodimus loosed his fingers from Megatron’s and stepped forward, throwing his arms around his guardian in a big hug. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Always, bit. Always.” Springer tilted his head against Rodimus’, however brief, before he stepped out of the hug. He turned his attention to Megatron, eyes hard and demanding. “You’ll take care of my prince.”

It wasn’t a request.

“To my last breath.”

“Good.” Springer’s hand rested on Rodimus’ shoulder before it slid down, and he gave his princeling a little push toward Megatron. “I’d hate to return with an army.”

No, he wouldn’t. Megatron had a feeling Springer would lead an invasion with glee.

Megatron tipped his head. “Kaon stands ready to welcome Iaconian visitors. Feel free to do so at any time.” He smiled, and if it showed a lot of teeth, well, that was the point.

Try me, Megatron suggested.

Springer replied in kind. “How friendly of you.”

“Captain, we should go,” Top Spin stepped up to Springer’s side.

Top Spin tilted his head in Pyro’s direction, and Springer followed the tilt. He scowled when he caught sight of his soldier, and Megatron suspected Pyro was in for quite the lecture. Not that he was doing anything untoward, but Megatron doubted Springer approved of any of his guards falling for a lowly Kaonite.

“You’re right.” Springer turned back toward Rodimus and placed his hand over his core, tipping his head at an angle. “Good luck, my prince. I hope we see you soon.”

He left, barking out an order that had Pyro startling and slinking back toward the rest of his companions. In his absence, Pipes’ feathers drooped and shoulders slumped.

Top Spin, however, lingered. He grinned warmly at Rodimus, and abruptly tugged the princeling into his arms.

“Congrats, kiddo,” he said, hauling Rodimus up into a hug that lifted him clear off the ground. Rodimus squeaked. “I’m so proud of you and so glad you’re happy.”

“At least someone is,” Rodimus grumbled before he was set back down on his feet. He smoothed his hands over his body, tucking in a few stray feathers.

“Give him time. He’ll come around.” Top Spin ruffled Rodimus’ crest, much to Rodimus’ scowl. “In his eyes, you’re still a bitlet.”

Rodimus rolled his eyes and ducked out from under Top Spin’s hand, frantically trying to card his feathers back into place. “I’m older than him.”

“Yeah, well, he’s an old soul.” Top Spin tweaked Rodimus’ nose with a laugh, and Rodimus huffed and stomped his foot.

Megatron got the feeling this was a usual game for the two of them, as Rodimus’ irritation seemed reflexive rather than genuine.

“Be good, kiddo,” Top Spin added. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Rodimus laughed and tilted his head back, baring his throat. “Too late.” He smugly gestured to the marks, his feathermane flattening to better show them off.

“Top Spin!”

That growl had been Springer, and while it was enough to startle Laserbeak on Soundwave’s shoulder, Top Spin didn’t flinch.

“Oops. Guess it’s time go.” Top Spin winked and whirled away, sauntering toward his captain with a whistle on his lips. “Coming, Captain!”

Rodimus moved back to Megatron’s side as the Iaconian Elite Guard phalanx marched out of Kaon, perfectly in formation, the flutters of their flag the last to be seen. They left without a backward glance, but Megatron was still sure it wasn’t the last they’d see of the Iaconians. Not with Rodimus still here.

“Ravage to ensure they leave,” Soundwave murmured from Megatron’s other side. He reached up to pat Laserbeak, soothing her ruffled feathers from Springer’s earlier shout.

“Good.”

Rodimus frowned. “You don’t trust them?” he asked, but at least he didn’t sound offended about it.

Megatron rested a hand on his lover’s shoulder. “I think if you were my prince, I’d have a hard time letting you go,” he said. “You say that Springer and I are alike, and so I’m following my instincts. I know what I would do.”

“You want to make sure I stay,” Rodimus said with a small smile, a hopeful one, like the cant of his feathers, the way he moved even closer.

“I thought that was obvious.”

“Maybe I like hearing you say it.” Rodimus moved in front of him, pressing closer, his crest flattening down as though he were uncertain. “Do it again.”

An easy task.

Megatron cupped Rodimus’ face gently, as though he were something easily broken. He tilted Rodimus up to look at him, taking in the contours of Rodimus’ face, the blue of his eyes, the soft blush spreading over Rodimus’ cheeks.

“I want you to stay,” Megatron murmured, because it was truth, and he did not care if Soundwave heard him, or if his flock saw him admitting it here and now. “I want to court you, to keep you, to mate you, if you’ll have me.”

Rodimus’ breathing hitched. His tongue flicked across his lips. “Kiss me,” he urged, his hands grasping at Megatron’s side, talons digging in.

“For my consort, anything.”

Megatron bent down, sealing his mouth over Rodimus’, tasting the mingled sweetness of their breakfast, and the heat of Rodimus on his lips.

Springer had gone, and Rodimus was still here.

It was the easiest promise Megatron had ever made.

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